



# NORTHERN NEWS



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## My Oakland

*Erika J. Sawyer, AICP, interviews Meera Velu  
Seventh in a series of interviews of local planners and  
residents in advance of the 2015 APA California Planning  
Conference in Oakland, Oct. 3–6.*

**Meera Velu** was raised in Fremont. She proudly chose to remain a Bay Area citizen, moving north and eventually settling in Oakland. She earned her master's in urban and environmental planning and policy from Tufts University and has worked in various planning capacities throughout the Bay Area. She is currently a researcher at Marstel-Day, excited to continue learning about Oakland communities and supporting their growth.

**H**ow long have you lived here?  
I've lived in the East Bay almost all my life — from Fremont to Berkeley and Oakland — and have been living in Oakland on and off for five years. The first time I visited Oakland was as a freshman at Berkeley. I took the 18 AC Transit to visit Koreana Plaza at 24th and Telegraph. I remember thinking that the neighborhood was kind of deserted at the time, but it had Korean restaurants and karaoke, which were big attractions for me. Then I found Art Murmur, the Vulcan Studios, and other artists' spaces and kept coming back to Oakland.

### What brought you back to Oakland to live?

Diversity. Oakland has people of all social and economic backgrounds and there is a place for anyone here. You can always find your group, which is something that I didn't experience while living in other parts of the U.S.



### What neighborhood do you call home?

Temescal. My neighborhood is sometimes called the "Jewel box," which refers to the old street names. My street used to be Pearl, and nearby streets were Gold, Silver, and Diamond. Currently, only Ruby, Opal, and Emerald Streets

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remain. There was actually a painting in Awaken Café, dated around the 1900s, of the Oakland street grid with those historic street names.

**What do you enjoy most about your neighborhood?**

I've mentioned the Korean restaurants and karaoke, but also the history of the neighborhood and its location. Temescal is close to Berkeley, Emeryville, West Oakland, and downtown, and everything seems to be available in just a 20-minute bike ride.

**What surprises you most about Oakland?**

The history and community in each and every neighborhood — something I learned through participating in community outreach with the City. Oakland has strong community leaders. Within each residential enclave are a lot of people doing really good work to support their neighborhoods.

**What do you see as Oakland's strengths?**

Diversity, again. It's a huge strength and brings a variety of ideas into play. More broadly, Oakland's location makes it attractive as it's close to both San Francisco and Silicon Valley. The layout of the city is also a strength. There are a lot of greenspaces in such a dense area; and if you want to be near the water, you have Lake Merritt and Jack London.

**What do you feel is the biggest challenge facing the city?**

How to increase housing stock while making sure it's affordable. Housing has been getting more expensive and inaccessible. Hopefully projects like Brooklyn Basin will bring in much-needed housing. Finding living-wage jobs for the people who live here is also part of the challenge in keeping Oakland accessible. The minimum wage increase might help keep people in Oakland by providing some cushion in the face of increased rents.

**Do you have a favorite neighborhood outside of your own neighborhood?**

I enjoy walking in the neighborhoods east of the Mandela Parkway. The housing is beautiful, it has a homey atmosphere, and you can feel Oakland's history there.

**What do you think surprises others about Oakland?**

That Oakland isn't so dangerous and that a lot is happening downtown. Even my friends who have lived their entire lives in San Francisco are surprised by what's happening downtown. The Fox and the Paramount are attracting people who have never been to the city.

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**Where do you take out-of-town visitors and why?**

Lake Merritt is perfect for people-watching and resting. It's close to restaurants, bars, and cafes. On a sunny day, it's enjoyable to sit under the Fairyland sign and look at the Oakland skyline.

**Where do you think Oakland's going?**

Oakland is making good progress towards sustainable transportation goals that will connect the city on many levels. Bike sharing is coming to Oakland, and bike lanes are proving that there is space for cars and bikes through inexpensive improvements, like green striping of lanes. The bike lane on Telegraph will link to the MacArthur BART transit village, which is under construction. In addition to housing, it will include ground-level retail, but I'm not sure what types of retail will be attracted to these spaces. There are still vacant storefronts on Telegraph and it's hard to say what will be revitalized first.

*Interviewer **Erika J. Sawyer, AICP**, is a senior planner at Marstel-Day, Oakland. As the firm's Western Regional Manager, she oversees the Oakland and Oceanside offices and Marstel-Day's client work in Twentynine Palms. ■*