

## **Fremont's Diversity Backlash** Centerville says no to Little Kabul as the city elects a new mayor.

**BY ROBERT GAMMON**

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Fremont has a widespread reputation for embracing its ethnic pluralism. Public officials are quick to note that more than 120 languages are spoken within the 92 square miles of the city. The city has an established Chinese-American community, a burgeoning Indo-American population, and an Afghan neighborhood that has garnered national recognition.

But you would never know it by looking at Fremont's political power structure. According to the 2000 Census, Asian Americans in the mostly nonwhite city make up 37 percent of the population. Latinos comprise another 13.5 percent. Yet Fremont's city council consists of four white men and just one Asian-American man. The Fremont school board? All five board members are white. The Ohlone College Board of Trustees? Six whites and one Asian American. The Washington Hospital District board? Four whites and one Asian American.

Then there's Tuesday's mayoral election -- between two white men who are both longtime members of the city council.

What's going on in the Bay Area's fourth-largest city? Political experts and community activists say it could be many years before Fremont's elected officials begin to mirror the ethnic diversity of the people they represent. A significant number of the city's 210,000 residents are recent immigrants, and it'll take time for them to gain a political foothold, they say.

But it's also clear from a recent series of controversial events that an influential and vocal contingent of Fremont residents are uncomfortable with the city's image as a multicultural community. Some seem to resent its transformation from a mostly white, blue-collar farming town -- so much so that diversity has now become a dirty word in one of the region's most diverse places.

"I think there's a feeling out there that diversity is being forced upon people," said Steve Cho, the city's vice mayor and lone Asian American on the city council. "I think some people who have been in Fremont for generations are saying, 'Diversity is not something that I wanted.'"

Cho is no radical activist. He's a Republican running for reelection, and clearly understands some of the political dynamics in Fremont. He makes sure, for example, that voters know that he was born in the United States, displaying that fact prominently in his bio on the city's Web site.

He also has firsthand experience with his city's diversity backlash. In June, Cho proposed that flags from around the world fly alongside the Stars and Stripes during Fremont's Fourth of July Parade. He said he was trying to generate enthusiasm for an event that was lagging in popularity.

Response to his proposal was swift. Critics said his idea smacked of political correctness and demanded that it be scrapped. Others said it was time for the city's immigrants to begin assimilating. The Boy Scouts pulled out of the parade altogether, citing fears of being enveloped in a political maelstrom. Eventually, volunteers stepped in to carry the flags in a parade entry whose name was changed from "Nation of Flags" to "Birthday Wishes from Other Nations."

A couple of months later, controversy erupted again, this time in Centerville, a 150-year-old section of the city that is one of Fremont's five founding neighborhoods. Some local residents and business owners got angry when Afghan community leaders floated the idea of erecting a small sign welcoming visitors to "Little Kabul," an Afghan-dominated, two-block business district in Centerville.

Fremont is home to the largest concentration of Afghans in the United States. For that reason, Little Kabul, as it was apparently first dubbed by a writer for the *San Jose Mercury News*, gained worldwide attention after 9/11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan. But some business leaders and residents of Centerville resent the moniker and wanted nothing to do with the sign. Afghan community leaders shelved the proposal indefinitely.

"The lack of understanding in our community, it was really harsh," said Rona Popal, executive director of the Afghan Coalition. "They really criticized our point of view."

Antidiversity sentiment is so strong that a daily newspaper endorsement citing the need for diversity on the all-white school board may actually have hampered the campaign of a Chinese-American candidate. At least, that's the concern being raised by political colleagues of candidate Ivy Wu after *The Argus* endorsed Wu late last month, while nonetheless calling her opponent, Rose Vargas, "better informed."

"In a city where almost 40 percent of the population is Asian ... we think it's crucial that at least one qualified Asian American sits on the board," the September 24 endorsement said.

Letters of outrage immediately began pouring into the *Argus*. One writer said she was "dismayed," and another said she was "appalled." Another called the endorsement "one of the most misguided pieces I've ever read." Another simply said: "Shame on you."

"It certainly hurt her campaign," observed Albert Wang of Citizens for a Better Community, the most influential Chinese-American group in Fremont. "Now Ivy has to defend her qualifications instead of talking about the issues."

Wu is doing her best to put a positive spin on the endorsement gone awry. "I don't want to respond to what's being said," she said. "I feel it's petty. People will find out who I am by how I act. Others are just going to believe what they're going to believe, no matter what."

It also says something about the racial politics in a city when community activists shy away from -- or even denounce -- the technique commonly employed by other cities to increase minority participation in politics. The technique? District elections. Fremont is the largest city in the Bay Area to still use at-large elections, which means that even city council candidates face the formidable task of attracting support from the entire city. By contrast, San Jose, San Francisco, and Oakland all employ district elections, which enable candidates to win a seat based solely on support from the smaller geographic areas they hope to represent.

Not surprisingly, all three have city councils more representative of the multicultural Bay Area. Oakland's council, for instance, features representation from all of the city's main ethnic groups: three Asian Americans, two African Americans, two whites, and one Latino.

"District elections can definitely help groups that are concentrated in certain areas but are diluted citywide," San Jose State University political science Professor Larry Gerston said. District elections also can inspire more minorities to register to vote and to run for office because it's easier to win a large neighborhood than an entire city, he said.

Over the years, several minority candidates have run for office in Fremont, but few have won. If Wu were running in the heavily Asian district of Fremont known as Mission San Jose, her supporters believe she would win in a landslide. Nevertheless, many of Fremont's mainstream ethnic activists treat the idea of district elections as if they were the electric third rail of politics. Citizens for a Better Community, for example, doesn't support district elections.

Jeevan Zutshi, who is prominent in Fremont's large Indo-American community, is blunt about it. District elections, he said, could result in "ethnic ghettos."

"You must have a candidate who can represent everyone," he said.

Zutshi and others believe potential minority candidates need to work their way up in Fremont's political system by first serving on lower-level commissions before jumping to elective office. "The truth is, we don't have an Indian who is ready," he said when asked why no Indian has won elective office in Fremont's history. "First, you have to become part of the mainstream."

Some Fremont community activists say it's unfair to compare Fremont with cities such as Oakland. Incorporated in 1956, Fremont is a much younger city, and the influx of immigrants there is a relatively recent phenomenon -- spurred greatly by the 1990s high-tech boom. By contrast, Oakland has been diverse for decades. As a result, it will take time, they said -- possibly another generation -- for Fremont's political system to catch up to its diverse population.

But some activists from newer or less politically active ethnic groups disagree with their more established colleagues. They said they would embrace district elections, and noted there is no work-your-way-up test for whites in Fremont. "The more diverse we are politically, the better off we would be," said Gil Singh, a trustee of the Sikh American Cultural Heritage Awareness Association. "I would like to get representation. I think it would be better for everybody."

The closest Fremont has come to an attempt at attracting more minorities to politics was a 1998 City Charter initiative that would have increased the number of councilmembers from five to seven. The thinking was that adding two seats would increase the odds of a minority getting elected. It lost by eight hundred votes.

Councilman Bill Pease, who is running for mayor, supported that measure but said he opposes district elections. As mayor, he said, he would not use ethnicity as a criterion when making appointments to boards and commissions. "Background and qualifications are more important," he said.

But his opponent, former Police Chief Bob Wasserman, believes the lack of minorities in elective office is a problem for Fremont, and thinks district elections will be in the city's future, maybe in eight to ten years. He also said he plans to seek out minority candidates for mayoral appointments. "When I was in the police department, I used to say that police officers should mirror the community," he said. "And I will use the same philosophy as mayor."

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Chris Duffey



Ivy Wu may fall victim to the diversity backlash.



**Bill Pease**



**Bob Wasserman**