

KEITH DURLINGER / STAFF

CITYHOOD CAMPAIGN: John Hsu, left, and Robert Lewis set up their information booth for the Rowland Heights Advocates for Cityhood at Yes Plaza in Rowland Heights on Saturday. The group is recruiting volunteers to collect 5,000 signatures to complete their application to become a city.

ROWLAND HEIGHTS — Although incorporating has long been discussed, activists say the prospect of a large housing development in their community's borders has catalyzed efforts to form a city.

The political action group Rowland Heights Advocates for Cityhood brought its application to the Local Agency Formation Commission for Los Angeles County but will have to collect about 5,000 signatures from registered voters before it is accepted, said Robert Lewis, who is spearheading the effort.

"The biggest issue for Rowland Heights is to get a say in government for this area," Lewis said.

Rowland Heights residents are angry at the possibility of Diamond Bar annexing a large portion of 3,000 acres in Rowland Heights owned by Aera Energy. Some community members believed annexation would allow the building of a 3,600-home development.

Residents cited increased traffic, pollution and potential harm to a large wildlife corridor that runs through the land as reasons for their opposition.

John Bellah, Rowland Heights Community Coordinating Council vice president, said surrounding cities often try to increase their tax base "at Rowland Heights' expense" through annexation.

"We're definitely trying to head off Diamond Bar's action," Lewis said.

Resident Sabrina Lee said she is undecided about cityhood and thinks incorporation should be approached with caution.

"Don't get me wrong, their efforts should be applauded," said the Ridgemoor Home Owners Association president.

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Rowland Heights explores cityhood

Housing plans spur residents to push forward

By Bethania Palma
Staff Writer

Lee said that since the Aera housing project would be in the "back yard" of her neighborhood, residents are opposed to it. But, she added, Rowland Heights becoming a city does not provide a guarantee that the development would be blocked.

"Once a city is formed, three out of five council members can change their minds just like that," she said. "We have to be careful — that's my current status. But maybe this opinion will change."

Cityhood proponents said timing is important.

A state law has gone into effect that re-allocates taxes in a way that would be detrimental to Rowland Heights as a city unless it begins the incorporation process before 2009, Lewis said.

He said a contract agency is working on determining what revenue Rowland Heights would generate as a city. A public hearing and vote by LAFCO would also be necessary

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Community exploring

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before the final step, an election, determines the outcome.

LAFCO is a government entity responsible for deciding on boundary issues, including annexation, incorporation and spheres of influence.

Lewis said he hopes to bring the cityhood option to Rowland Heights residents on the November 2008 ballot.

"Win, lose or draw, the major result of this whole exercise will be that we're going to give everyone the opportunity to say we want the final authority in our hands," Lewis said.

He added the hope is to incorporate without raising taxes.

"If our initial fiscal analysis comes back indicating we'll have to raise taxes, we'll step back and re-evaluate the whole thing," he said.

Residents on Thursday expressed lukewarm feelings on both sides of the issue.

"I like it the way it is right now," said Shawna Martinez, 32. "I've lived here a long time, and I like it."

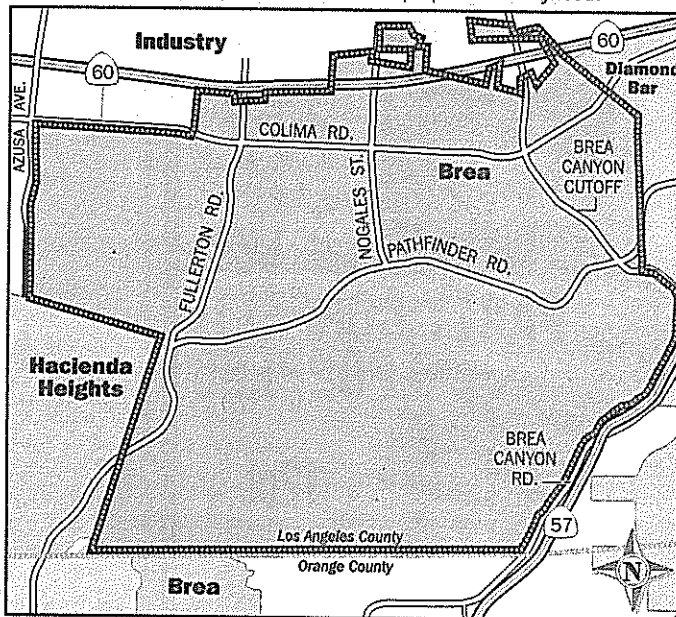
Jose Juarez, 38, said he thought incorporation could be a positive thing.

"I think," he said, "self-determination would be good for the Rowland Heights community."

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Rowland Heights

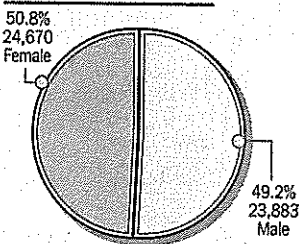
Named after San Gabriel Valley pioneer John A. Rowland, Rowland Heights is the second-most populous unincorporated area in the east San Gabriel Valley. The following map indicates the area proposed for cityhood.



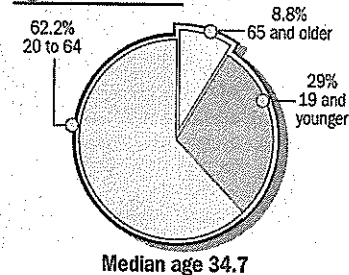
General information

Size: 9 square miles
Population: 48,553
Total housing units: 14,543
Unemployment rate: 3.9%
Labor force: 50,553

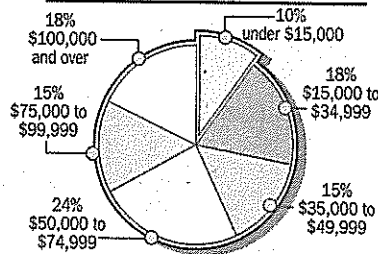
Gender breakdown:



Age breakdown:



Estimated household income:



SOURCES: 1998-99 Claritas/United Way of Los Angeles, California Development Department and U.S. Census 2000

Staff graphic by MANUEL AMAY