THE Rockridge News
www.rockridge.org
VOL 38 • NO. 6 • ISSUE NO. 387 • JUNE 5, 2021 CIRCULATION: 5,800 RESIDENCES; 200 BUSINESSES
Sponsored by the Rockridge Community Planning Council (RCPC) • 4900 Shattuck Ave., PO Box 22504, Oakland 94609

RCPC's Place in Rockridge History

— by Annette Floystrup, RCPC Board Member

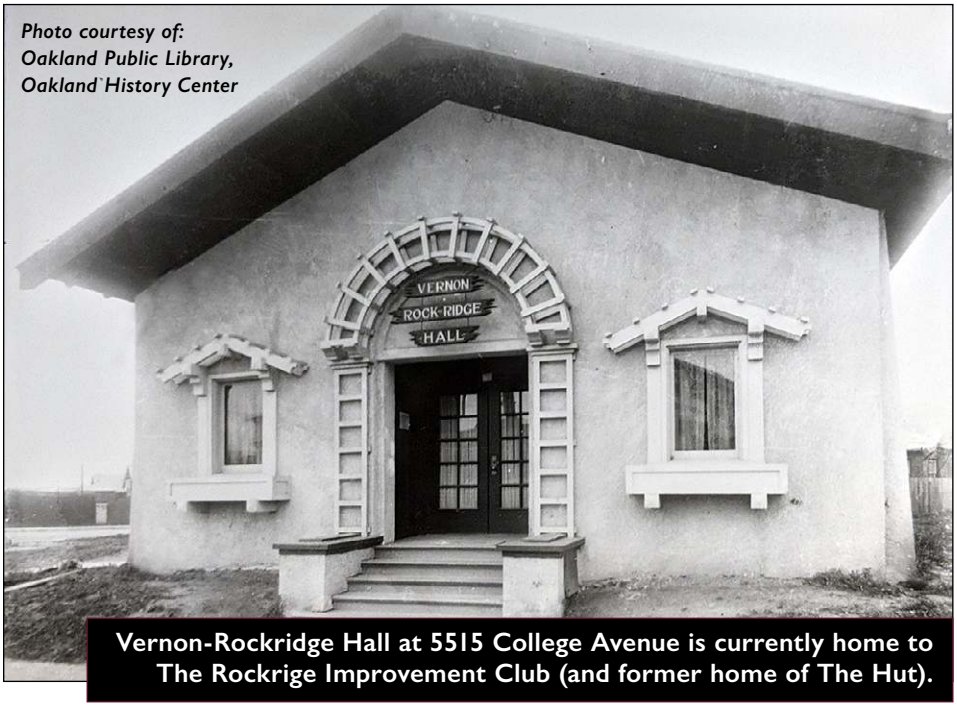


Photo courtesy of: Oakland Public Library, Oakland History Center

Vernon-Rockridge Hall at 5515 College Avenue is currently home to The Rockrige Improvement Club (and former home of The Hut).

Why does the Rockridge Community Planning Council (RCPC) exist? What has it accomplished? In this first in a series on Rockridge and the RCPC, we begin with a short look back in history to convey the context surrounding the organization's genesis.

RCPC has its roots in the Vernon-Rockridge Improvement Club, later the Rockridge Improvement Club, founded in 1910. The early neighborhood association was concerned with the basics — community policing and safety, fire suppression services, schools, and a library. These concerns have remained largely the same over the decades.

In the ten years following the devastating 1906 earthquake, Oakland's population more than doubled as people and businesses relocated from San Francisco. In what is now Upper Rockridge, a development was

RCPC History, see page 4

What Is Land Cost? Why Should I Care?

— by Stuart Flashman, RCPC Land Use Committee Chair

This is the first of a series of articles explaining the results of the Rockridge Housing study.

In some ways, the cost of land may seem an esoteric concept, but it's central to understanding why houses and apartments in Rockridge cost as much as they do. For homeowners, the first introduction to land cost is often homeowner's insurance — what you pay an insurer to protect against things like fire and flood damage. The cost of a homeowner's insurance policy is based in part on

Land Cost, see next page

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— by Michelle Boyd, RCPC Communications Chair

Want to stay informed about Rockridge Community Planning Council (RCPC) and partner events in between editions of this newsletter? Interested in receiving *The Rockridge News* in your inbox? Like everyone these days, RCPC is going more and more digital.

We'd love to include you on our email list if you are not signed up already. We promise we won't spam you. We'll send you updates a few times a month on items we know our community members care about. Scan the QR code (on right) with your phone's QR code app to find our signup form. You can also visit https://bit.ly/3u71jz7.

Own a storefront? We'll hang a poster at your business to get the word out to more neighbors. Please drop us a note at info@rockridge.org to participate.

RCPC updates in your inbox

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Land Cost, from front page

"replacement cost." That's what it would cost to rebuild your house if it burned to the ground. What often surprises people is that the replacement cost is usually considerably less than what it cost to buy the house. The difference is the land cost.

For example, a house may have cost $900,000, but the insurance company might insure a replacement cost of $400,000. That's because the insurer thinks it would take $400,000 to rebuild the house from scratch. The difference between what the house cost to buy and its replacement cost, in this case, $500,000, is the land cost.

It is perhaps obvious that land cost will depend on how much land there is. In Rockridge, house lots are often about 4,000 square feet or one-eleventh of an acre. Therefore, if the cost of a 4,000 square foot lot was $500,000, the land would cost $500,000 x 11 = $5.5 million per acre.

While it might seem that the cost of an acre of land would be constant, it's anything but. It is a truism in real estate that three factors are important in real estate pricing: location, location, and location. That's an oversimplification, but location is central to a land's value, and it has an enormous effect on the cost of housing.

Of course, land cost is influenced by many factors: Is the land level or on a slope? Is it near an earthquake fault, a flood zone, or other hazardous condition? Is it near public transit or a freeway exit? Is it noisy or quiet? How far is it from shopping areas? Theaters? Parks? How good are the area's public schools? All these factors will influence land cost, and they reflect how desirable a house at that location would be to a buyer. (Similar factors apply to commercially zoned land.)

In fact, the cost to build a house may be considerably less than the cost to buy the land it sits on. That's particularly true here in Rockridge. With high walkability, easy access to transit and freeways, good schools, and pleasant tree-lined streets, land costs in Rockridge are among the highest in Oakland, and indeed higher than most places in the East Bay. Indeed, the cost of land in Rockridge can be $11 million per acre, or even more.

As we'll see in the next article in this series, this can make building new housing here, affordable housing in particular, somewhat problematic. ■

Slow Streets Program — Continue or Not?

Oakland Department of Transportation (OakDOT) had a range of initiatives implemented in response to the pandemic. One of those initiatives, launched in April 2020, was the Slow Streets Program, which was intended "to support safe physical activity and alleviate overcrowding in parks and on trails by discouraging through traffic on certain local streets." Temporary barricades and more permanent circles were installed on several streets, slowing the traffic flow in one or both directions on a single street.

District One (which includes Rockridge) has a number of streets that are part of the program. The City is currently engaged in Phase II of the program, which began last July, and consists of evaluation and development of specific recommendations for each location. Based on the feedback, Slow Street signage and barricades will either be upgraded to more durable materials and other context-specific changes, or the Slow Street designation will be removed.

Many district residents expressed support and interest in this program. Councilmember Kalb and District One staff are receiving periodic reports on the program as a whole and on each specific location, and will be sharing more information as the program develops.

To make your voice heard, visit: tinyurl.com/oaklandslowstreets. ■

THE RockridgeNews

The Rockridge News was founded March 1986 by Don Kinkead, and is published monthly (except August). It is sponsored by the Rockridge Community Planning Council (RCPC), a nonprofit public benefit organization founded to: preserve and enhance the unique character of the Rockridge neighborhood; promote the health, safety and quality of life of its residents; furnish a forum for community involvement; and provide leadership and representation of neighborhood interests.

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Are there community issues you'd like to see covered in *The Rockridge News*? Have questions about newsletter distribution? Want to volunteer to be a *Rockridge News* block captain? Want to write a letter to the Editor?

Articles submitted for consideration should be emailed to the editor. All submissions are limited to 600 words max (300 words for letters), and must include the author's name, email address, and city or neighborhood of residence.

All submissions are subject to editing for clarity and brevity. To submit content, or for reprints of an article, contact: editor@rockridge.org.

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Views expressed in published articles do not necessarily reflect those of The Rockridge News, its editor, or the board of directors of the Rockridge Community Planning Council.

RCPC

Rockridge Community Planning Council — Land Use Committee

The next Land Use Committee meeting will be held on **Monday, June 21, at 7:30pm**, via Zoom. The meeting is open to the public. Please check Rockridge.org or the RCPC Facebook page the week before for details. **Send an email to landuse@rockridge.org or call (510) 652-5373 to receive a web link or phone number to attend.**

RCPC Land Use Committee Update — June 2021

by Stuart Flashman, RCPC Land Use Committee Chair

The Land Use Committee held its monthly meeting on May 24th via Zoom, with a quorum of members present.

Rockridge Housing Study

The subcommittee working on evaluating the feasibility of incentives for affordable housing has at this point produced a rough spreadsheet model that allows evaluation of the financial feasibility of housing project proposals. Three general categories of projects have been evaluated: construction of multifamily housing (2-4 units) on a single residential lot; combining several residential lots to produce a larger multifamily project; and construction of a large multifamily residential project on an "opportunity site" one acre in size.

With current land costs and construction costs, almost any project in Rockridge would appear not to pencil out — even with 100 percent market rate units. Even application of the State's density bonus provision would not make private housing projects feasible. The subcommittee will continue to refine its model, consider some possible future scenarios, and evaluate possible incentives that might make building new housing, especially affordable housing, feasible.

The Committee has begun presenting study results in *The Rockridge News* with an article explaining the meaning and importance of land costs (see article on front page). The next article will discuss preliminary housing feasibility conclusions.

Current Housing Legislation Affecting Rockridge

There was further discussion of an article outlining currently pending State legislation that could significantly affect Rockridge. There was general agreement that two Senate bills, SB 9 (Atkins) and SB 10 (Wiener) are the most significant bills with a likelihood of becoming law. It was agreed that an article explaining the two bills should appear in the July issue of *The Rockridge News*. Stuart Flashman and David Garcia will be the primary authors of the article.

Phase II of "Shops at the Ridge" (Broadway/Pleasant Valley)

The committee discussed further what might happen with this large site, which currently sits idle. There appears to be a standoff between the master tenant (TRC, Inc.) and the property's owner. TRC would like to develop the site with a mixture of housing, office, and retail space. The owner has been dead-set against allowing any residential use. As was mentioned last month, TRC has proposed as a fallback position either an auto dealership, big box retail, or drive-through fast food businesses. Several *Rockridge News* readers submitted comments strenuously opposing this. Unfortunately, options like a park or sports fields seem unlikely except perhaps as a short-term interim use. The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that the RCPC board open discussions with TRC, Councilmember Kalb, City staff, and potentially the property's owner on coming up with an attractive and feasible plan for use of the site.

Proposal for a Massage Establishment (5479 College — formerly Right-Way Shoe Repair)

The City has announced a public hearing on June 22nd, 2021, at 3:30pm via Zoom on this application for a use permit. The hearing can be accessed online at: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86977774756. The committee felt that more information on the application and proposed business should be obtained and provided to the Board of Directors for its consideration.

A video of the meeting will be posted on RCPC's YouTube channel. ■







Rock-Ridge Place was an early development above Broadway in what is now known as Upper Rockridge.

Photo: Courtesy of Oakland Public Library, Oakland History Center, circa 1910.

***RCPC History,** from front page*

begun in 1910 called Rock-Ridge Place. Three related developments spanned from 51st Street to Ocean View and up to present day Hwy 13. The lots were expensive and intended to attract wealthy residents.

The working class, including many Italians who came to work the quarry, could not afford the high prices of Rock-Ridge Place. They bought homes in the Vernon tract, the flatlands on either side of College Avenue. Truck farms and orchards west of College Avenue gave way to craftsman bungalows by the dozen, the majority of them being built between 1910 and 1920.

In the early 1960s, demolition began for construction of the Grove-Shafter freeway (now Hwy 24) and BART. More than 1,400 structures were demolished, mostly single family dwellings. College Avenue was bisected and brought to its commercial knees. Construction lasted until 1970, and the traffic disruption, coupled with the massive loss of population, steadily eroded the commercial base. Store after store closed its doors, until finally 50 percent of the businesses stood empty and boarded up. Crime in the area skyrocketed, and Rockridge became Oakland's highest crime neighborhood in the late 60s and early 70s.

The neighborhood responded by establishing Neighborhood Watch groups through a network of small block associations, six of which eventually coalesced to form the beginnings of the RCPC we know today.

This series on the RCPC and Rockridge history will continue in upcoming issues of The Rockridge News. ■

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Housing in Rockridge: Affordable Only, or Market Rate Too?

— by Ken Rich, RCPC Board Member

The views presented in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of the Rockridge Community Planning Council or its Board of Directors.

As a new RCPC Board member, I'm excited to get engaged in the important issues facing our neighborhood. So I thought I'd start with one of the most important ones — housing and affordable housing. I often hear the sentiment that if Rockridge residents support new housing construction in our neighborhood at all, it should only be "affordable housing." I feel differently and believe we should welcome new housing of all types into our neighborhood. In the remainder of this article, I hope to explain why I believe this to be true.

First, some facts and definitions: "Affordable Housing" is generally accepted to mean housing whose monthly rent or mortgage payment is no more than 30 percent of the gross income of a family making somewhere between 30 percent and 120 percent of the median income for Oakland (around $35,000 to $140,000 per year). Because these rents or sale prices are set so low, and the cost to construct new housing is so high, significant subsidies are needed to build affordable housing.

The bulk of these subsidies come from state and federal sources, but especially in California, our cities must make sizable investments as well. In Oakland, that investment generally equates to the city needing to contribute roughly $200,000 per new affordable housing unit. To build 200 units of 100 percent affordable housing in Rockridge would cost the City of Oakland $40 million.

Given these high costs, and the need to create affordable housing

***Housing in Rockridge,** see next page*

Housing in Rockridge, *from previous page*

throughout the city, it is unlikely that the City would have the resources to invest in anything more than a nominal amount of affordable housing in our neighborhood. So, when someone advocates for only affordable housing to be built here in Rockridge, whether they realize it or not, they are arguing for little or no housing to be built here at all.

What about market-rate housing (sometimes disparagingly called "luxury housing")? These are just apartments (certainly not more luxurious than our craftsman houses) whose price tags are high because these days they cost between $600,000 and $800,000 per unit to build, and because there is more demand than supply. But, is it true that building some of this type of housing in Rockridge is a good idea?

Do The Math

Let's assume that a typical two-bedroom house in Rockridge sells for $1.4 million. That translates, if you assume 20 percent down, to a monthly mortgage, taxes, and insurance payment of about $6,500 per month. Let's also assume that a typical family is comfortable spending 30 percent of its gross income on mortgage, taxes and insurance. That family would need to make $260,000 per year to buy a small house in Rockridge. Compare that to around $3,500 per month for a large two-bedroom apartment at the Logan, a new apartment building on 51st and Telegraph. Using the same 30 percent rule, a family would need to make $140,000 per year to live there.

For reference, a couple consisting of two Oakland public school teachers would make an average of about $140,000 per year. To be sure $140,000 is still not a small amount of money. Think about how many families making at least $140,000 but less than $260,000 we could welcome into Rockridge as amazing new neighbors. Since there are comparatively few existing apartments in Rockridge, building some new ones might just be the easiest way to make our neighborhood more diverse and affordable. ■



Key streetcar heading to Rockridge along College Avenue, approaching Claremont Avenue, circa 1910–1920.

Photo: Courtesy of Oakland Public Library, Oakland History Center

Rockridge: Success Under Pressure

— by Jody Colley, Rockridge District Association

The shops and services that line College Avenue are re-emerging from a challenging year of pandemic-induced restrictions and closures. Despite some business turnover, the overall low vacancy rate relative to other districts in Oakland is a testament to Rockridge's resilient local economy.

The area's demographics, location, and public transit access all are contributing to a relatively quick recovery. You may not be aware, however, of the role of the Rockridge District Association (RDA) in supporting the local businesses that operate within its boundaries.

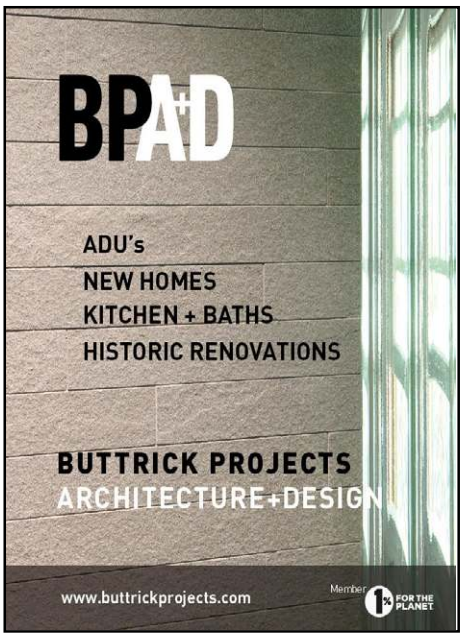
For example, the RDA takes under its wings the stewardship of tree maintenance and planting along College Avenue. This alone over the years has exceeded $100,000 in costs, and continues to grow. The RDA is also responsible for removing damaged and hazardous newsstands and abandoned bus shelters, street cleaning, trash receptacle maintenance, and repainting blighted street poles.

Some neighborhood festivities are led by the RDA, including holiday lights, shopping campaigns, and the annual Out & About Festival. As a liaison between City services and Rockridge businesses, the RDA monitors public safety, roadwork, economic development opportunities, and regulations that may impact merchants in the area.

The RDA is a Business Improvement District (BID) formed in 2000 by the vote of business owners to self-assess an annual fee that funds vital projects such as streetscapes, lighting, safety, and media promotions to help attract locals and visitors. Essentially, RDA businesses pay to fill in the gaps where City of Oakland services end for the benefit of the community at large.

Prior to this model, Rockridge was

RDA, *see page 12*



The Greater Rockridge Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council Meets on June 10th

— by Karen Ivy, Secretary, Greater Rockridge NCPC, beats 12Y and 13X

Ever wonder what community policing is about? You should, because either you or your landlord pay the property tax for it through Measure Z. Ever wonder what the Community Policing Advisory Board (CPAB) does? Find out by joining the Greater Rockridge Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) at the **next meeting on June 10 on Zoom**.

Guest speaker, **Creighton Davis**, chair of Oakland's CPAB, will present his vision for community-oriented policing. Join us to discuss crime and public safety issues in your area. Bring your neighbors to come hear what he has to say, and feel free to ask questions.

You can meet our relatively new Community Resource Officers (CROs), **Officer Meeran Gichki** (Beat 12), and **Officer Aaron Johnson** (Beat 13). You will also meet our **Neighborhood Services Coordinator, Angela Moore** from the City Administrator's Office, who can facilitate and assist residents with issues or concerns in their neighborhoods in partnership with the Oakland police department and all City departments.

If you're on one of the NCPC's email lists, you'll get an automatic reminder closer to the date. If you aren't, you can sign up at RockridgeNeighborhoodWatchNetwork+subscribe@groups.io or RockridgeNCPC+subscribe@groups.io. We hope to see you there.

Recent Crime Stats

April was a relatively quiet month in 12Y and 13X except for general property crime (burglary and theft), of which we had 15 in 12Y and 16 in 13X. No other crime category in either beat exceeded 10 incidents in the month. Even auto-related crime was down — 8 incidents in 12Y and 4 in 13X. As I look back over the pandemic, in most months, no category of crime in either beat exceeded 20 incidents (less than one incident per day).

The exceptions were March (the first month of lockdown) and May of 2020. In May, 12Y topped out at 32 auto-related property crimes and 26 general property crimes. For more crime stats, visit our Crime Stats and Maps at https://tinyurl.com/yzeplobr.

The April 2021 minutes of the Greater Rockridge NCPC are now available online at this link: https://tinyurl.com/y7r5qmbz. You can also open the document directly at this link: https://tinyurl.com/26ak72wn. ■

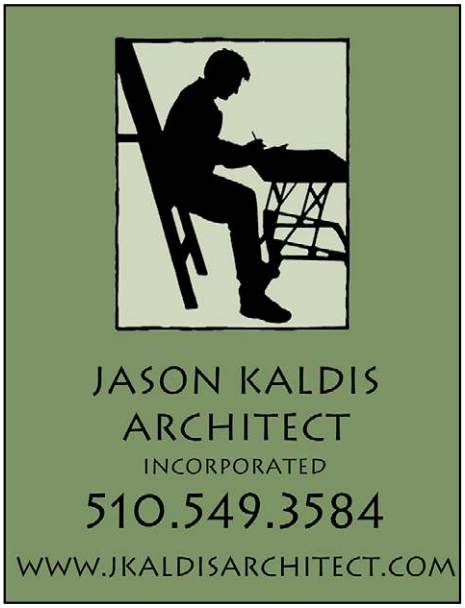
NCPC MEETING

The Greater Rockridge Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) will hold its regular bimonthly meeting on **Thursday, June 10, at 7pm**, on Zoom.

To Join Zoom Meeting:
https://zoom.us/j/99809678270?pwd=RG5ROU90WmZLNU9aT09uOHFZQ294Zz09

Meeting ID: 998 0967 8270

Passcode: 990756







Join *The Rockridge News* Family of Volunteers

— by Susan Montauk, Rockridge News Delivery Manager

Please join us in welcoming three new volunteers who will be replacing several retiring block captains and a marshal: **Cristin Williams** is the new marshal for the Colby/Hillegass route; **Charlotte Strother** will deliver along Claremont Avenue, **Adele Mendelson** will deliver to Locksley; **Mark Coyle** will deliver to Chabot Road; Brenda Reeves will deliver to Colby, and **Dylan McCune**, who is just nine years old, will be delivering the newsletter to Lawton.

Many thanks to our long-time volunteers for their dedication — **Jim Clarke** and **Liz Maxwell**, **Coley Florance**, **Meredith Kaplan**, **Kristin Wilson** and **Jo and Ken Ellis**. We so appreciate all your efforts on behalf of our Rockridge community.

We are very fortunate to have new volunteers, and are waiting to hear from other neighbors who want to help us fill the following routes:

- **25A: 400 block of 57th Street from Ayala to Telegraph and all of Vicente Street**
- **20G: From Pedestrian Way down even numbers on Claremont up Forest to Miles both sides, then down Claremont to Freeway.**

This is a once-a-month responsibility during the weekend after the first Friday of the month, and can take up to a half hour to complete. Block Captains will have their bundle delivered directly to their doorstep, and then go door-do-door to delivery to each of the homes. Newsletters must be tossed onto porches or inserted into the railings (not in mailboxes, please!).

To volunteer, email Susan Montauk at smontauk@gmail.com, or call (510) 547-3855. ■

Flex Streets Eases Use of Sidewalks for the Public

With the move to the Orange Tier this past March, and a fully reopened economy coming mid-June, bars with parklets are fully operating indoors and outdoors to serve food and drink. Bars, restaurants, and other establishments that want to add or continue to use the adjacent sidewalk, parking lane, or traffic lane for outdoor seating are encouraged to see to the City's Flex Street Initiative at oaklandca.gov/flexstreets.

All fees are still being waived and permitting is streamlined for use of the public rights-of-way including sidewalks, parking lanes and even street closures. Businesses expanding operations into private parking lots and other private outdoor areas will also benefit. Some restaurant-goers would like to see the parklets remain long term, and this is under consideration. Take this online survey or text FLEX to (510) 380-7360. ■









Tech's First Black Male Valedictorian Tells Classmates "We're Going to Change the World"

— by Judith Doner Berne, Rockridge News Staff Writer

He's been making local and national news as the first Black male valedictorian in the 107-year history of Oakland Technical High School, but that's not how 18-year-old Ahmed Muhammad views it.

"It is definitely a bittersweet moment," he told me as we sat on the steps of Oakland Tech on an overcast Sunday in mid-May. "I'm proud. It took a lot of hard work, but I shouldn't have to be the first Black anything. I'm the first Black male valedictorian who was afforded the opportunity to achieve it at Tech. I hope it inspires other kids."

Tech, like all Oakland Unified School District schools, has an open enrollment plan, so kids from all over the city can apply to attend. Muhammad lives in East Oakland, sports a 4.7 GPA, and plays point guard for its varsity basketball team. With more free time during the recent pandemic, he founded KitsCubed, a nonprofit that donates hands-on science kits to minority Oakland kids with money raised by selling them through Oaklandish stores, and online at www.kitscubed.com.

His goal: "To excite younger students about the wonders of science. I find this especially important because our communities of color often lack access to the hands-on science experience that makes learning so enjoyable."

He was accepted and offered a scholarship to all 11 colleges to which he applied. After whittling it down to Harvard and Stanford, he decided on Stanford, where he will study engineering. His decision was partly driven by his desire to continue to be involved with and expand KitsCubed, which now has development and assembly teams, and so he could stay close to family.

His achievements, Muhammad said, "all come from my family. They taught me life lessons, reading, and arithmetic." His dad is a retired Oakland Fire Department captain who, along with his mom, a Cambodian immigrant, runs a real estate firm. "They've been supportive all my life." He has an adult brother and a sister in 11th grade at Head-Royce School. "She does better than me," he said.

Throughout elementary and middle school, "I probably went to seven or eight different Oakland schools, naming Kaiser Elementary and Montera Middle schools as his favorites.

His parents, he said, "were looking for the perfect fit. I think they wanted me to be constantly challenged."

His four years at Tech gave him stability, Muhammad said. "I was able to make tight bonds with fewer people as opposed to weaker bonds with a lot of people." After taking the school's most advanced math class his freshman year, he turned to several Peralta District community colleges, as well as UC Berkeley and Stanford for higher-level math and science classes.

eyes on Rockridge

"I probably have double the credits I need to graduate," he said.

"He's the first freshman to ever take AP Calculus BC," said Mary Daisy Fong who has taught math for 20 years. "He was the brightest student in the class and of course he aced it." After that, she said, "He kind of came under my wing. He's just an amazing kid. Even as a ninth-grader, he had such a very good heart and sense of perspective. And, as he matured, he just got better."

"I love math and science," Muhammad said, "not so much the theories but their application to the real world." But he also learned to love Tech's acclaimed Paideia classes, which intertwine history and English, despite "this is not my thing." Paideia

Eyes on Rockridge, *see next page*

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4/10/2021	3	1	5732 Clover Dr	$1,585,000	$1,585,000	0	$1,585,000
4/13/2021	2	2	5885 Ocean View Dr	$1,149,000	$1,149,000	6	$1,355,000
4/15/2021	4	4	5848 Colby St	$2,495,000	$2,495,000	0	$2,850,000
4/19/2021	4	3.5	5850 Chabot Ct	$1,599,000	$1,749,000	46	$1,720,000
4/23/2021	2	1	481 55Th St	$799,000	$799,000	4	$960,000
4/26/2021	1	1.5	448 60th St	$799,000	$799,000	15	$1,325,000
4/27/2021	2	1	400 60th St	$998,000	$998,000	8	$1,450,000
4/27/2021	4	4	6121 Harwood Ave	$1,999,995	$1,999,995	4	$3,025,000
4/27/2021	4	1.5	6475 Colby St	$1,950,000	$1,950,000	11	$2,730,000
4/29/2021	3	2	5947 Keith Ave	$995,000	$995,000	16	$1,300,000

Homes sold in April closed 28% over the asking price on average.

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Eyes on Rockridge, *from previous page*

teachers Douglas Stubblefield and Marietta Joe, he said, "rearranged the furniture in my mind."

"What makes Ahmed such a remarkable scholar is that he is so intellectually curious," Joe recalled. "As he moved through high school, we could see his interests widening. There is a beautiful humbleness to his curiosity. Ahmed could have stuck with what he thought were his natural inclinations in STEM, and found joy right there, in that comfort zone. But he discovered that the humanities were just as disorderly and mechanistic, just as wondrous and mysterious, as science and math, and he flourished there as well.

"What makes Ahmed such a remarkable human being is his humanity." Joe wrote, "He connects so well with his peers in the classroom and on the basketball court. He has real conversations with his teachers and professors. There is an authenticity and honesty to him that makes him so accessible to others even with all his brilliance. He has the ability to self-reflect, and that reflection leads him to kindness, and empathy, and humor."

Although playing point guard for Tech's Bulldogs has been an important part of Muhammad's life, he doesn't expect to try out for Stanford's team. "I bet I could train hard enough to walk on," he said. "But I know I'm not going to the NBA. I might play club or intramural, but I want to explore other stuff." He hesitated when asked what advice he might have for younger students. "I'm just 18. I'm still in high school. I don't feel qualified."

Muhammad's valedictory speech, delivered at four graduation ceremonies over two days at the end of May to meet Covid-19 guidelines, lauded the Oakland Tech Class of 2021 and "what we have had to endure." He gave me this sense of it: As ninth graders, we rallied against gun violence, he said. In 10th grade, we went on strike with the teachers. As juniors, we were part of the global youth climate strike and had to switch to distance learning as the pandemic



Photo: Judy Berne

"I loved my time at Tech," says Class of 2021 Valedictorian Ahmed Muhammad, pictured here in front of the school.

took hold. And as seniors, we were at the forefront of the peaceful Black Lives Matter march that began at Tech in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd as well as continued distance learning.

"No other class has had to endure that," Muhammad said. "I think our class has been prepared and we're special. It's a testament to the teachers here. We're going to change the world." *(See him deliver his commencement speech on YouTube.)*

To comment on this article and to suggest topics for future columns, please email judyberne@att.net. ■

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In Memoriam

Paul Cooper
(May 1951-March 2021)

— by Chris Orr



On March 3, 2021, my husband Paul Cooper, co-owner of Pipe Spy Plumbing and Sewer Services, died of Covid-19. Paul was born in 1951 in Philadelphia, and we came to Oakland together in 1974. In 1985, we made our home on the Rockridge-Elmwood boundary. Yes, there are houses in the area that are literally in both Berkeley and Oakland, a fact that amused Paul who was fond of saying we cooked in Berkeley (our kitchen) and ate in Oakland (our dining room).

Paul was avid about alternative energy. For his 50th birthday, he converted a Porsche 914 to electric drive, long before the modern auto industry caught up with his vision of vehicles running without fossil fuels. On weekends, he could often be found at the curb, tinkering on the car, always happy to answer the questions of passers-by on how and why to convert to electric.

In the late 1970s, Paul founded a solar hot water company in Oakland called Solar Station. Solar Station developed solar water-heating systems for the UC Cooperative Student Housing and ABC Diaper in Berkeley — at that time the largest solar hot water system in California. Although subsidies for residential and commercial solar dried up after President Jimmy Carter's advocacy was thwarted by his successor Ronald Reagan, Paul continued his career in water systems, focusing on the essential services of general plumbing and sewers.

Along with his partner Heiko Dzierzon, Paul grew the Pipe Spy business from two plumbers working out of their respective homes in 1998, to over two dozen employees and a busy shop today. Even in this field, Paul excelled at innovation, leading Pipe Spy to become one of the first companies to use trenchless technologies to replace sewer lines with minimal impact on landscaping.

Paul was well known among our Rockridge and Elmwood neighbors as a friend and contractor, and more often both. Paul was a kind man, a problem-solver and a mentor for many. He is greatly missed. ■





Meet Your Neighbor: Alexis Madrigal, Journalist Committed to Equity and Lifting up Community

— Interview by Casey Farmer, RCPC Secretary



Rockridge resident Alexis Madrigal is an author, a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, and co-founder of the COVID Tracking Project.

Alexis Madrigal is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, a former staff writer at *WIRED*, and most recently a co-founder of the COVID Tracking Project. Alexis serves on the board of Chapter 510, which is a "made-in-Oakland youth writing, bookmaking & publishing center."

Casey: Please tell our readers a little about yourself.

Alexis: I was born in Mexico City. My father is Mexican and my mother is from Massachusetts. When I was young, we moved to LA and then to rural Washington so I really grew up in the woods. I've been the same size as I was since I was about 10 years old, so early on I thought I'd be a professional athlete. But when I didn't continue to grow, I decided I wanted to be a writer.

My very first media gig was in 1996 when I started a UCLA basketball blog at age 14. It was my first taste of writing and I loved it. I also enjoyed building community online. For me, the internet was such a lifeline to other places outside of the woods of my childhood home. I studied fiction at Harvard then started writing for *WIRED* in 2007, specifically about science and the internet.

Casey: What is your Rockridge story? Why did you move here?

Alexis: My now-wife and I found Rockridge when we moved back from the East Coast to the Bay and were looking for a place to live and have babies. We found a great home on Colby Street which we love with all of our hearts. My favorite thing about the neighborhood is actually in front of my house where so many of our neighbors gather. Our few blocks make up a very tight-knit community that is multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-generational.

Casey: You were just named as a host of KQED's Forum. What are you excited about and what will you bring to this show? (https://www.kqed.org/forum).

Alexis: I'm excited to actively work to knit together the narrative of a region that is home to nine counties and 100 cities. The problems we face in the Bay Area need to be solved by working together, which is often difficult to do with government. We need to do that work on a cultural level.

Casey: You co-founded the COVID Tracking Project in the early weeks of the pandemic. What was it and why did your team develop it?

Alexis: The COVID Tracking Project sought to provide COVID data when the federal government couldn't be relied upon to do so — oftentimes they were not telling the whole truth about the data or the government didn't have all of the data public health officials needed. Our mission was to fill those gaps in the data. It was developed through volunteer labor and philanthropic contributions with my co-founder Erin Kissane.

Casey: Analyzing this data so closely and writing about the impacts of the pandemic must have been challenging. What did you learn from the experience?

Alexis: It was a difficult year to track the COVID numbers. What I took away from the experience was a saying among public health experts: "the causes of the causes." You can look at health disparities in a bunch of different ways and believe a lot of reasons for those disparities, but only if you go a layer deeper can you truly know what is going on. ■

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RDA, from page 5

represented by the College Avenue Merchant's Association which relied solely on volunteers and the generosity of a handful of donor merchants. Formalizing a BID allowed for a steady stream of revenue to cover much needed and costly projects that could be undertaken and sustained for years.

Though one of the first of its kind in Oakland, over a dozen districts have since followed with similar merchant-tenant, commercial-property owner, and even residential-property owner assessments to raise funds for similar projects.

Despite being one of the top revenue-generating districts funding the City of Oakland, the RDA works off a lean budget of approximately $180,000 per year — a small slice of the overall $4+ million in private-sourced and controlled funds that are allocated to business districts in Oakland on an annual basis.

At the time of its formation as a BID, property owners lobbied successfully to apply assessment fees to business operators only, not commercial property or residential property owners.

While this limited the revenue potential for the district significantly, it keeps the burden of this community investment overwhelmingly on the shoulders of the small businesses and solopreneurs that line the first and second floors of College Avenue. This investment into their local business community allows everyone in the neighborhood to benefit from a safer, cleaner, and more bustling business district.

The RDA is a nonprofit organization led by a volunteer board of directors composed of business stakeholders and residents with one staff position to support its mission.

Those interested in joining the board should email info@rockridgedistrict.com for information; this year's annual elections will be held on June 17, 2021. ■

Businesses that pay into the RDA fund are within specified addresses:

- **62nd Street [307]**
- **Broadway [5050, 5152, 5100 - 5301 (odd numbers only)]**
- **Chabot [6201]**
- **Claremont [6076 - 6250]**
- **College [5231 - 6323]**
- **Florio [6201]**
- **Keith [5655]**
- **Manila [5400]**
- **Miles [5697 to 5699], and**
- **Oak Grove [5723]**

Clearing the Air About the Leaf Blower Ban

— by Skip Fogarty

Some homeowners and landscapers may not be aware that as of April 1, 2021, gas-powered leaf blowers have been banned throughout the city of Oakland (*see April 2021 Rockridge News*). A new ordinance, authored by Councilmember Dan Kalb, prohibits these noisy, polluting machines in our neighborhoods. The City Council approved Kalb's bill with a unanimous vote. Come October, gas-powered string trimmers will also be deemed obsolete — at least as far as the law is concerned.

"It's something I've been wanting to do for years, but the city has many urgent issues to address," says Kalb. "Public safety and the housing crisis are higher on our agenda, but the environmental and quality-of-life impacts of these machines can not be ignored."

Oakland joins at least 20 other California towns and cities that have red-lined leaf blowers. Indeed, there's a movement afoot to eliminate gas-powered gardening equipment, and the reasons are manifold.

Let's start with the noise. A typical gas blower generates anywhere from 65 to 115 decibels. At the high end

***Blower Ban,** see next page*



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***Blower Ban,** from previous page*

of that range, the noise is equivalent to operating a chain saw. And the low frequencies emitted by these machines carry over longer distances and project significantly more sonic force than electric blowers. Even when decibel ratings are equivalent, electric equipment operates at higher frequencies that do not carry the same impact as gas blowers.

"Besides the nuisance factor, these machines are very dangerous to the health and safety of the workers who operate them," Kalb emphasizes. While neighbors may be annoyed by a blower's roar, it's only for short durations. But a gardener is running that machine one foot from his ear for a couple of hours every day. Hearing damage is cumulative and, combined with noxious exhaust fumes, workers are endangered by this equipment.

Speaking of fumes, let's consider the impact on air quality. The California Air Resources Board (CARB) states that running a gas blower for one hour belches as much smog as driving a Toyota Camry from Los Angeles to Denver. "Relative to climate change, we need to recognize and mitigate the impact of this type of equipment," says Kalb.

Two-stroke engines are notorious polluters because, by design, they exhaust a lot of unburned, atomized gas and oil. Compared to modern vehicles, CARB studies show that these gas-powered tools emit 500 times as many hydrocarbons and 25 times the carbon monoxide. This is a primitive technology that was banned for motorcycles and marine engines long ago.



The City of Oakland received a grant to help replace its gas-powered blowers and trimmers.

Photo by Dave Simbosa on Unsplash

Finally, leaf blowers — gas or electric — can launch spores, mold, pollen, and other allergens into the air to drift across property lines and irritate sensitive neighbors.

With a new law on the books, what about enforcement? "As with any new ordinance, some people will become aware of it sooner than others," Kalb states, "the city does not have the resources to drive around looking for violations, so it's incumbent upon property owners to speak with their contractors and spread the word in their neighborhoods."

To this point, "we have focused on building awareness and communicating with both business owners and residents," Kalb explains. He added that the City itself has been converting to electric equipment for several years now, partially funded by a state grant.

The ordinance lays out a tiered schedule of fines ranging from $100 to $1,000 for repeat violations. Complaints may be filed with the City's Planning & Building Department's code enforcement division. Fines will be levied on the property or business owner, not landscaping crews.

"We obviously can't chase down every single complaint, but we'll be looking for patterns and will intervene when necessary," says Kalb.

In other cities, compliance with blower bans has been achieved over time. Encouragingly, neighboring Piedmont and Berkeley have made great strides in eliminating the use of this type of equipment.

Also on the horizon is Assembly Bill 1346 that proposes blocking the sale of all gas-powered mowers, trimmers, and small engines used chiefly in recreational vehicles. The Assembly bill as drafted would require all of these machines to be zero-emission by 2024.

One of the sponsors of the bill, Assemblymember Lorena Gonzales (D-San Diego), says, "It's time to phase out these super polluters. They're not only bad for our environment but can cause serious health issues for workers and our communities."

Got a story tip for Skip? Email editor@rockridge.org. ■





TNT Strength Finds A Home on College Ave.

TNT Strength opened its doors at 5255 College Ave in Rockridge on April 1 in a studio with a long fitness legacy including being formerly owned by champion bodybuilder Jack Delinger. TNT, which stands for "Truth Not Trends," offers individualized strength training sessions both in the studio and online with safe, efficient strength training techniques and research-based exercise principles.

The owners, **Liam "Taku" Bauer** and **Jesse Schmidt**, have more than 35 years of combined experience as strength coaches and have worked with professional athletes, amateur athletes, children, and adults into their 90s. Visit them at https://tnt-strength.com. ■



TNT coach Jesse Schmidt helps client Fiona Doyle with her workout.

Refill Shop To Open New Location in Rockridge

The Re-Up Refill Shop will be moving to a new location by the end of this month at 6025 College Avenue. This retail store will offer ecological bath, food, and cleaning products in refillable containers in order to reduce single-use plastic waste, along with a bulk-food section. They also offer free milkman-style bicycle delivery. Check out their products online before their storefront opens at ReUpRefills.org. ■

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The deadline for the July 2021 issue is June 17 (available on July 3). For more details, email Susan Montauk at smontauk@gmail.com.

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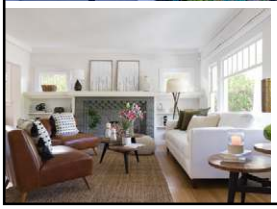
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