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## Struggling to keep a small-town feel

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SERIES: SMALL CITIES, BIG CHALLENGES (1st part of an occasional series)

SUMMARY: Wood Village experiences growing pains

as well as financial and cultural challenges

A driving tour of this city takes just a few minutes:

City Hall is on Halsey Street, just across from the original village. Up 238th Drive is the high-cost upper village. West on Glisan Street lies the shiny new retail center, bordered by a new subdivision and a mobile-home park.

This compactness and the small-town feel it brings are what longtime residents of Wood Village value and what draws newcomers to this city, population 2,965. Mayor Dave Fuller prides himself in the smallness and in how it lets the city quickly respond to residents' needs.

But longtime residents and newcomers alike are saying the small-town experience is being lost as the community grows and people become disconnected. For a place Wood Village's size, that's no small thing.

The city, squeezed onto a square mile of land between Fairview and Troutdale on Gresham's northern border, also faces financial problems. Recent controversial proposals --one for instituting Oregon's first sales tax and another for building an entertainment center and casino at the former greyhound racing park --have fallen through, at least for now.

These growing pains of suburbanization form the city's major challenge: How can Wood Village --landlocked and almost out of developable land, threatened by the loss of tax sources and rising costs of city services, fragmented by an increasingly diverse population --sustain itself as a close-knit community?

"People don't know each other like they used to do," said 88-year-old Lois Douglas, one of the city's remaining original residents. "People got different ways of entertaining themselves now, so we don't have a connection with them."

Douglas moved with her husband to the original village, which still sits between Halsey Street and 238th Drive, in 1954. The village was one of Oregon's first planned communities, constructed as a company town for the Reynolds Aluminum plant during World War II.

Many women stayed at home at the time, Douglas said. While her husband worked at Reynolds Aluminum as a crane operator, Douglas and neighboring women would get together for coffee. They formed a Women's Booster Club at City Hall. Sometimes they would take the bus to downtown Portland for shopping, or attend the Wood Village Baptist Church.

Now Douglas lives alone in her two-bedroom home on Elm Avenue. Most of the longtime residents she remembers have died or are in assisted-living facilities. All around her, homes regularly go up for sale and newcomers move in.

In fact, according to city statistics, people who have lived here between one and five years make up the largest group of Wood Village residents.

Some of these newcomers are immigrants. Behind the town center, off Arata Road, workers were hammering roofs and installing windows last month at Riverwood Estates, a new subdivision. Russian-speaking families from the former Soviet Union have bought most of the 87 homes there, according to real estate agents who sold the homes. Prices range from \$220,000 to \$315,000.

While the Russian-speakers enjoy their new homes and the proximity to shops, many continue finding their sense of community in Portland churches.

"I'm not really spending much time here," said Mariya Paskalov, a Ukrainian who moved from Southeast Portland to Wood Village with her husband and three children this summer. "I'm working in Northwest Portland, going to church in Portland, and I just come back home at night."

While living in Wood Village means owning a home for many Russian-speaking families such as the Paskalovs, their Latino neighbors at the Wood Village Green Mobile Home Park, also off Arata Road, are often lower-income.

But, like the Russian-speakers, the Latinos (about 15 percent of the city's population) are also searching for a sense of community.

The park's managers estimate that more than half of the 185 homes at Wood Village Green are owned and occupied by families originally from Mexico. Women here still cover themselves with the traditional deep-blue rebozos, shawls popular in the mountain villages of Michoacan.

"People here are very simple, very good people," said Jorge Osorio, pastor of Gresham's Comunidad Cristiana, who leads a weekly Spanish prayer group at the park's community center. Osorio said the Latinos tend to be isolated and not involved in their city. "With the second generation, there might be more integration and more participation," he said.

If ethnicity and language form one dividing line in Wood Village, wealth creates another. Though Wood Village Green lies only five minutes from the posh upper village, it is miles away economically. In the upper village, affluent folks such as former Republican House Speaker Karen Minnis reside in custom-designed homes on half-acre lots.

City officials admit they've had trouble involving some of the newer, less-wealthy communities, and they have done little to reach them. An effort to conduct a survey (in Spanish) at Wood Village Green failed.

"We didn't get a single survey back," said Councilor Pat Smith. "I think these people (Latinos) just don't want to be involved."

Osorio said that's not the case. He said hiring bilingual staff or creating an assessment group would be one way for the city to include Latinos. "The city should try to interact more with the community, try to discover and dialogue," he said.

Involving these new residents may, in fact, prove key to the city's financial future.

While commercial and residential development is keeping the city afloat for now, it's a scenario Wood Village can't sustain for long. The landlocked city has little available land left --most of it being industrial land near Interstate 84 -- and property taxes don't provide enough revenue to cover the rising cost of already bare-bones city services.

"If the costs go up in excess of 10 percent a year and you can increase your revenue by 3 percent a year, then any fourth-grader can figure out you won't last long," Fuller said at a recent mayors' meeting.

In 2005, Fuller proposed a 1 percent general retail sales tax. It would have been an Oregon first, but the city council tabled the idea under mounting opposition from residents and businesses. Last May, Wood Village voters overwhelmingly approved a charter amendment that requires a public vote on any new tax or tax increase, essentially slamming the door on the sales tax --unless residents vote for it.

Fuller was dealt another blow when the entertainment center and casino, which two Lake Oswego partners want to build on the vacant dog track, did not make it onto November's statewide ballot. Proponents hope for a vote in 2008.

And just last week, Multnomah County Commissioner Ted Wheeler told Fuller and the mayors of Fairview, Troutdale and Gresham that the business income tax, which Fuller calls "vital," would eventually need to be phased out. A portion of the tax is distributed to the cities in east county based on population and assessed value.

"I don't think the BIT (business income tax) will be here indefinitely," Wheeler said at a meeting at Fairview City Hall.

The board of commissioners chair suggested looking for alternatives, to which Fuller responded with another pitch for the sales tax. Some of the other mayors rolled their eyes.

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Graphic - Map Wood Village

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