

Multicultural Center of Marin



Photo courtesy of Multicultural Center of Marin



**MULTICULTURAL
CENTER OF MARIN**

The **Multicultural Center of Marin** works with diverse immigrant and underserved communities of Marin County in advancing their social, cultural, and economic well-being through self-empowerment programs that encourage participation in the broader civic life of U.S. society.

Founded in 2002, the Multicultural Center of Marin serves more than 5,000 low-income individuals each year; over 90% served are Latinx. The Multicultural Center of Marin has three program areas: Youth and Family Empowerment; Community Resilience; and Arts, Culture and Media. The Multicultural Center of Marin has partnered with county and city agencies to conduct multiple community forums to provide a linguistically and culturally appropriate setting for community members to participate in county and city planning processes. They also started the Canal Community Resilience Council (CCRC) in 2019 to provide an ongoing forum for such conversations and allow the community to determine the priority topics to address. Topics such as Proposition 1, The Disadvantaged and Tribal Community Involvement Program (DACTI Program), Measure AA sea level rise adaptation projects, housing and tenants rights, and waste reduction have been addressed in this venue. In addition, The Multicultural Center of Marin has various methods of reaching the community with key information, such as two weekly radio shows, an extensive text list, social media, and a team of Block Captains who reach out within the Canal neighborhood.



Project Description

The Multicultural Center of Marin engaged community members and worked to understand water issues as they manifest in the Canal neighborhood of San Rafael by conducting needs assessment activities including a water survey, stakeholder engagement, and community forums regarding water issues. One goal of the needs assessment was to identify priority implementation projects. Projects appropriate for Proposition 1 implementation funds will be developed into proposals.

Background on San Rafael’s Canal Neighborhood

Demographics

The combined population for the census tracts that cover the Canal area (1122.01 and 1122.02) in 2017 was 12,307 (American Community Survey, 2017).

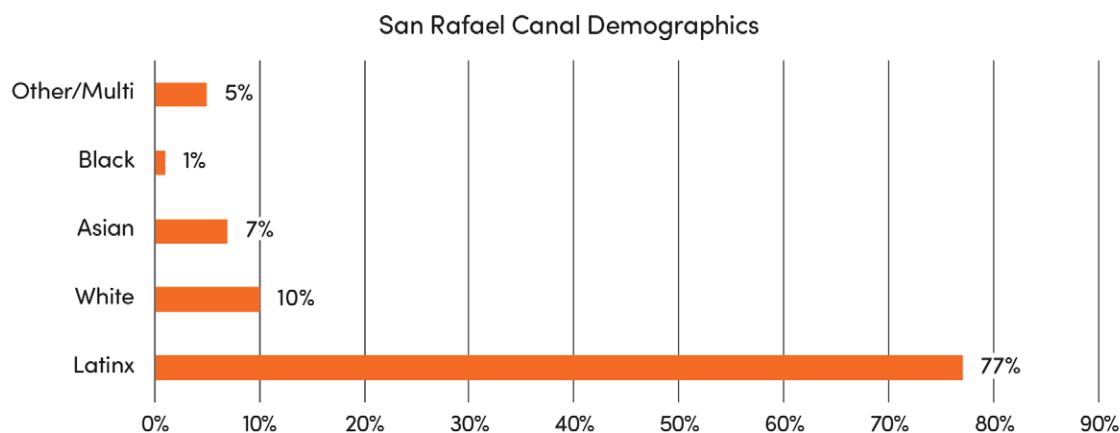
77.5% of residents in the Canal area identified as Latinx, 9.9% as white, 6.8% Asian, and 1% Black/African American.

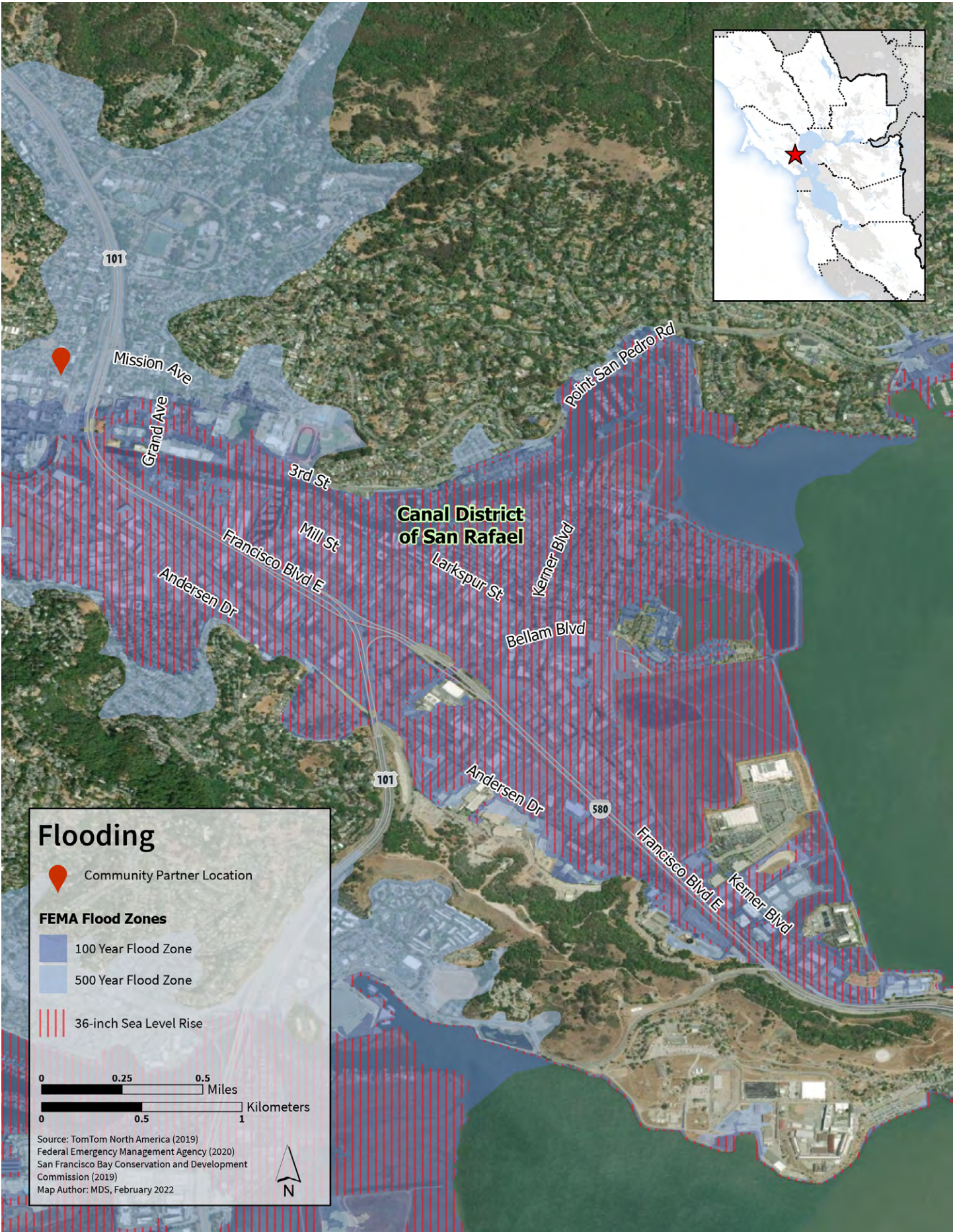
48% of residents in the Canal area of San Rafael were reported to be not U.S. citizens. Many residents in the Canal area are believed to be undocumented, and community advocates believe the population is undercounted.

37.2% of households in the Canal area are considered Limited English Proficient, meaning there are individuals who do not speak English as a first language and who have limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English. 79.9% of households in the Canal area speak a language other than English. 66.4 % are considered Spanish speaking only.

The poverty rate in the Canal area in 2017 was 31%, which was a 60.2% increase since 2010. The life expectancy in the Canal area is nine years shorter than the county overall average (Marin County Community Development Agency, 2020).

Residents of the Canal area live nine years fewer on average than who live in the Town of Ross, which is 15 minutes away by car (Bud-Sharpe & Lewis, 2012).





History of Environmental Injustice and Inequity in the Canal Neighborhood

The Canal neighborhood of San Rafael is one of the highest density areas of low-income residents in Marin County. Named for the canal that was dredged along San Rafael Creek, the area was originally developed in the 1950s and 60s as apartments for young couples and new college graduates. After the Vietnam War, many refugees from southeast Asian countries arrived in California and took service jobs in Marin, and many refugees from the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala also settled in the Canal area neighborhood. Over three decades, the Canal area's population changed to being almost 90% immigrants or children of immigrants (Marin County Community Development Agency, 2020). It is among the most segregated districts in the Bay Area, according to the U.C. Berkeley Othering and Belonging Institute (Neilson, 2021).

Historically, the Canal neighborhood of San Rafael has experienced significant discrimination, and residents have not been adequately involved in county or city planning. Existing social justice concerns include racial and immigration profiling, lack of food security, substandard housing, threat of displacement, and employment instability. Environmental justice concerns include inundation projected in the Canal area from sea level rise. Waterways flow through the community and there are limited routes in and out of the community.

The Canal neighborhood has a “very high degree of overcrowding” and over the past 10 years, “overcrowding has increased dramatically as rental prices have skyrocketed (Marin County Community Development Agency, 2020).” According to the 2017 American Community Survey, 46.9% of residents in the Canal live in overcrowded conditions. The Canal area is also the location of much of San Rafael's industry and one of Marin's four residential and commercial waste management facilities (Marin County Community Development Agency, 2020). This industry and other businesses could be a source of water contamination. More information is needed about the status of key infrastructure and community water concerns in the Canal neighborhood.

Community-Identified Strengths and Assets

Residents of the Canal community have strong networks due to a variety of factors, including family networks, pockets of residents originating from the same countries and even the same towns, having shared experiences as immigrants, many having a shared language, and living in close proximity with children attending mostly the same schools. This leads to a sense of shared concerns and interdependence. In addition, there are a few organizations that work alongside the community to foster community engagement and leadership.

Given that Canal residents are mostly low income, they statistically have a lower carbon footprint than their wealthier neighbors in Marin. For example, they are more likely to use alternative transportation, such as biking, walking, and public transportation. They are likely to adapt to carbon reduction measures more easily than their wealthier neighbors. The Multicultural Center of Marin is working to involve local residents in a wetlands restoration project at Tiscornia Marsh and has worked with disadvantaged youth to produce radio shows and a video about sea level rise and the Canal Neighborhood. Through the DACTI Program, The Multicultural Center of Marin championed a needs assessment process to understand community water concerns in the Canal area.

Summary of Outreach and Education Efforts

From February through August 2019, the Multicultural Center of Marin conducted over 180 short verbal surveys with Canal residents at 10 locations and events in the Canal area that drew from various areas in the in community, including:

- San Pedro Elementary School (6/7/19)
- Marin Warriors Boxing Club (3/14/19; 6/10/19)
- Conservation Corps North Bay (2/22/19)
- The Multicultural Center of Marin Food Distribution (3/23/19)
- Pickleweed Park - Day of Child/Earth Day (4/20/19)
- Laurel Dell Elementary School Charla Café (5/28/19)
- Pickleweed Child Care and Flagship Bus (5/13/19)
- Canal Alliance Food Distribution (6/18/19)
- National Night Out (8/6/19)

The surveys included open-ended questions asking about residents' experiences with water. Some of the questions asked include:

1. How is the quality of the water you drink?
2. How is your access to water?
3. Do you have other issues around water, if so what?
4. What is your experience around flooding after storms?
5. The program coordinator developed a How-To Guide for Water Assessments to support bilingual staff in implementing the surveys. Most of the staff come from the community and conducted the surveys in trusted settings, such as food distribution sites, schools, and at community events.

Needs Assessment Findings

Numbers in parentheses indicate number of locations—out of 10—where an issue was raised:

- Low quality of drinking water: including smell, taste, and cloudy appearance (9)
- Buying drinking water, boiling water, or filtering water due to distrust of tap water quality (9)
- Flooding that interferes with activities (9)
- Trash in streets when it rains or floods (5)
- No access to hot water at times (5)
- Gutters clogged when raining (4)
- No problem reported (4)
- Low water pressure (3)
- Old pipes (2)
- Do not bring up issues due to fear of landlords (2)

Details of Top Priority Issues



#1: Water Quality: Distrust of the quality of water coming from the tap

- Water is unclear, having an unusual color and a chlorine or metallic smell
- A general feeling that faucet water is not safe, and could cause possible health effects
- Many homes rely on purchased bottled water (causing more environmental problems)



#2: Stormwater accumulation: When there is heavy rain there is flooding in the streets.

This creates limited access to:

- Markets
- Community centers
- Schools
- Residents' homes

The only full-size grocery store (i.e., not 7-11 or little deli markets) in the Canal area is at the corner of Kerner Boulevard and Bellam Avenue, a major intersection in the neighborhood. Historically that area floods, making it hard for people to access the store, especially on foot, as many do.



Flooding in the Canal area. Photo from <https://www.acclimatewest.org/flooding-forecasts/>



#3: Age of pipes: Water pipes are old, affecting the quality and quantity of water coming from the taps

- Low water pressure occurs for many, especially at certain times when many in a building are using water.
- At times residents experience a lack of hot water.



#4: Trash after rains: Trash was observed floating in the streets of the neighborhood during and after big rains, causing drains to clog and neighborhoods to be unsightly.

The results of the surveys were then discussed with the Canal Community Resilience Council (CCRC) to draw out more specific information and to prioritize the concerns. The CCRC was started by The Multicultural Center of Marin in 2019 to ensure community voices and perspectives are part of planning processes that affect residents of the Canal neighborhood. Residents and agency representatives attend to discuss a range of environmental issues, housing, and many other topics that concern the community. Residents are being trained in leadership and advocacy. At this point, county and city agencies request to bring topics to the meeting for community input.



Marin Municipal Water District representative Matt Sagues discussing the results of the water assessment with the Canal Community Resilience Council. Photo courtesy of Multicultural Center of Marin

Next Steps

The Multicultural Center of Marin continues to advocate and strategically collaborate with the County of Marin, City of San Rafael, the Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD), and other agencies and governmental entities to ensure community knowledge and perspectives are an integral part of water management assessments, planning and decision-making. The Multicultural Center of Marin will continue collaborations from the planning, stage to pursue permanent remedies to protect vulnerable communities.

The Multicultural Center of Marin is working in collaboration with several partners, including MMWD, City of San Rafael, and County of Marin to develop project proposals for funding to address the top water-related needs identified through the needs assessment process, including:

- Improving infrastructure to reduce flooding and ensure water quality
- Water testing through the DACTI Program Tap Water Quality Testing Effort
- Educating the community about tap water quality compared to bottled water
- Working with waste management on garbage accumulation
- Addressing housing, safety, and other related issues with community

Potential Proposition 1 Implementation (or other funding sources) Projects:

- Pipe replacement
- Pump station installation
- Community water station
- Faucet-mounted water filters
- Community education

Technical Assistance Needed

- Identify and engage entities to apply for implementation funds
- Develop ideas into potential Proposition 1 proposals
- Implementation and analysis of the DACTI Program Tap Water Quality Testing Effort

Tap water quality continues to be a central concern for the community. They report that water smells, looks, and tastes abnormal. The concerns are so widespread that people report staff at the local clinic telling them not to drink it. This is likely due to the fact that many staff there are members of the community and there has been limited effort to determine the actual status of the water. MMWD tests the water within their system and provides reports on the results, but these reports are not easily accessible to the community and do not take into account any changes the water might experience while running through the private pipe system. The DACTI Program Tap Water Quality Testing Effort will help provide accurate information that can be shared with the community. In addition, replacing some of the MMWD pipes will contribute to ensuring water quality since the outdated pipes are vulnerable to oil infiltration and breakage. Finally, given that water is likely to continue presenting as abnormal, even if not actually unhealthy, it will be important to educate residents as well as provide community water stations to reduce the use of bottled water, which adds to environmental issues as well as depleting limited household funds needed for food and rent.

References

American Community Survey. 2017 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles. [DP05: ACS DEMOGRAPHIC AND HOUSING... - Census Bureau Table](#)

Burd-Sharps, S., & Lewis, K. (2012). *A Portrait of Marin*. American Human Development Project of the Social Science Research Council. http://www.measureofamerica.org/docs/APOM_Final-SinglePages_12.14.11.pdf

Marin County Community Development Agency. January 2020. County of Marin Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing. [Analysis of Impediments - County of Marin \(marincounty.org\)](#)

Neilson, S. This neighborhood in Marin is the most segregated in the Bay Area. San Francisco Chronicle. October 10, 2021. [This neighborhood in Marin is the most segregated in the Bay Area \(sfchronicle.com\)](#)