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# Bay Area dissatisfaction: Rich, poor, young and old unhappy here

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Poll: More residents now want to leave than stay



Bay Area dissatisfaction: It reaches every county – and more residents are planning to leave.

By **LOUIS HANSEN** | lhansen@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: February 23, 2020 at 7:00 a.m. | UPDATED: February 24, 2020 at 11:48 a.m.

Bay Area residents — despite being swept up in an unprecedented economic boom — are growing ever unhappier with the place they call home.

Nearly 3 in 4 residents think the quality of life in the Bay Area has gotten worse in the last five years, according to a new poll of registered voters conducted for this news organization and the Silicon Valley Leadership Group. That marks an astonishing 10-point jump in dissatisfaction from last year.

In another dramatic shift from last year, more residents are thinking about moving, 47 percent, than staying, 45 percent. Nearly 10 percent say they have definite plans to leave this year.

The survey unearths a remarkable paradox — high wages, an expanding economy, record growth in home values, coupled with natural wonders have failed to alleviate the crushing toll of longer commutes, spreading homeless encampments, and budget-breaking prices for houses, apartments, child care and date nights.

Sara Leslie, a Bay Area native living in Los Gatos, sees the mounting stress in her friends and family, made worse by rapidly changing neighborhoods and an eroding sense of community. “I know so many people moving,” said Leslie, 46. “I don’t see that the financial gain is worth the stress.”

Dave Metz of FM3 Research, which conducted the poll, said the high levels of dissatisfaction are almost unprecedented given the region’s strong economy. Last year, 44 percent of residents said they expected to leave in a few years, while half expected to stay. The new survey follows a trend of growing unrest found in 2016 and 2017 polls by the Bay Area Council, where residents saying they planned to move grew from about 33 to 40 percent.

“Nobody is really happy with the way things are going,” Metz said.

The survey of 1,257 registered voters in five core Bay Area counties reflects deep misgivings across the social strata — wealthy, established homeowners, middle-class workers, poor people and younger residents in apartments all sense a decline in their quality of life:

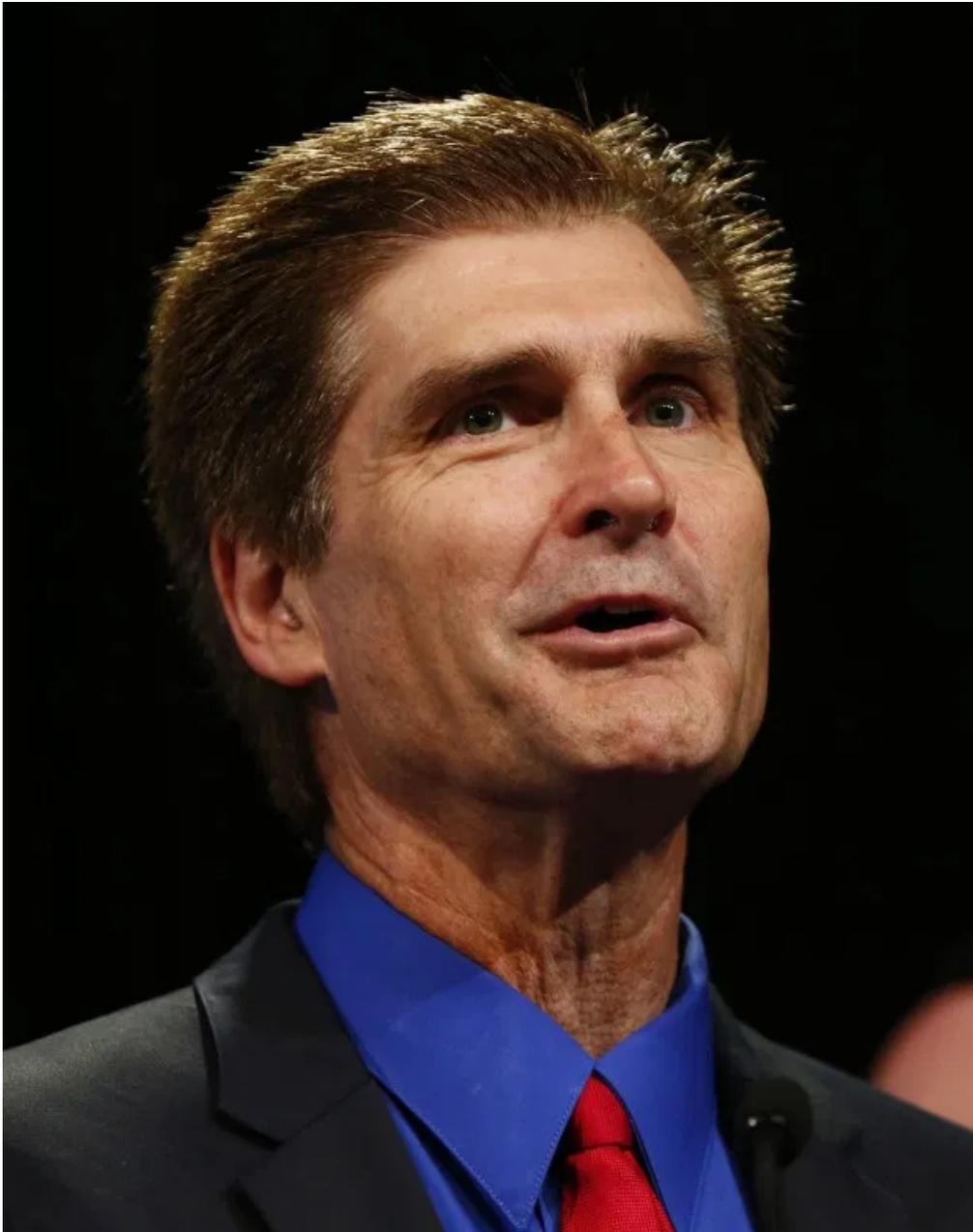
- **Rich and poor:** About 77 percent of respondents making less than \$60,000 and 74 percent making more than \$120,000 felt the region was getting worse;
- **Political affiliation:** Republicans (81 percent) and Independents (80 percent) were more pessimistic than Democrats (70 percent)
- **Young and old:** Roughly 76 percent of surveyed residents between the ages of 18 and 49 said the quality of life has declined, similar to those between 50 and 64 (73 percent) and over 65 (75 percent);
- **Homeowners and renters:** And despite record gains in home values and personal wealth since 2012, homeowners (73 percent) agree with renters (76 percent) that Bay Area life has gotten worse.

Angst about the future also runs deep. About 65 percent of Bay Area residents surveyed say the region is headed in the wrong direction, up from 47 percent last year. Residents now are almost as worried about the region's future as the country's future, with 72 percent pessimistic about the direction of the United States.

Residents say they've grown frustrated with the inability of state and local leaders to fix long-standing and obvious problems — homeless and RV camps popping up along city streets, rising housing costs sinking the working poor and middle class, and traffic and transit solutions running the bureaucratic gauntlet for years until comatose or dead.

The poll reflects a growing concern about homelessness. This year, nearly 9 in 10 residents called it an extremely or very serious problem, up from 8 in 10 last year. "That is about as bright a flashing red light as you can see," said Metz.

"It's the cumulative weight, like rock after rock placed on your chest, that's come to a breaking point for many of our neighbors, friends and family members," said Silicon Valley Leadership Group CEO Carl Guardino. "These challenges won't be solved overnight."



Carl Guardino, President and CEO, Silicon Valley Leadership Group, worries about how many people have definite plans to leave. (Gary Reyes/ Bay Area News Group)

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Guardino is concerned that nearly 10 percent of residents say they have concrete plans to move. They've decided other cities are better places to live and work than the Bay Area.

"The choice we have is, are we going to fight or flight?" said Guardino. "I still think our area is worth fighting for."

Richard Hallsted, 62, recently retired as an operations manager for a manufacturing company in the East Bay. He and his wife have lived in Palo Alto for more than 40 years and raised their two daughters in the city.

During a recent family walk through their neighborhood, he saw four homeless people pushing shopping carts along the streets. It was a new sight in their community.

“What do you do?” Hallsted asked and sighed. “I don’t know. If you built a bunch of condos on El Camino (Real), they couldn’t afford them.”

Hallsted feels the big issues — transit, infrastructure, fixing state pension obligations — have been ignored by politicians more interested in small battles and identity politics. “They need to get back to basics,” he said.

But even the litany of daily annoyances fails to dislodge many long-term residents. Homeowners and those over 65 say they’re likely to stay put.

Donald Prestosz, 71, a retired high school teacher and businessman living in Half Moon Bay, said the Bay Area he has called home since 1969 has become too liberal. He hates one-party, Democratic rule in Sacramento. “If you don’t have diversity of thought,” said Prestosz, a Republican, “you’ll never get anywhere.”

But Prestosz has no plans to leave his mobile home a short walk from the ocean. His doctors and favorite golf courses are all nearby. He’s sliced his handicap to 12. “My quality of life,” he said, “is great.”

Irene Yen, 55, a public health professor at UC Merced, bought her home in north Oakland 20 years ago. The family raised their two sons and sent them to very good public schools, she said. But she’s worried about public employees and other workers getting priced out.

Much has changed — once a predominantly black neighborhood, her community has gentrified as techies and other professionals priced out of San Francisco move in. Yen loves the energy and plans to stay: “I have a lot of affection for Oakland.”

For renters, the prospect of putting down roots in the Bay Area — even if they grew up here — seems bleak. Roughly 6 in 10 renters say they expect to move in the next few years.

Austin Rickli, 22, grew up in Antioch and Brentwood and expects to finish his computer science degree at Sonoma State in a few months. Despite good grades, low student debt and a marketable degree, his hopes of staying in the Bay Area after graduation are waning.

Most entry salaries at smaller tech companies range around \$50,000 — a healthy paycheck at a glance, but one quickly eaten up by rent and loan payments, he said.

He could move back home, he said, but he might choose another city. “I want to do anything in my power to start my own life,” Rickli said.

Many feel they're reaching the breaking point.

Robert Nueding and his wife, Kelly, arrived in the Bay Area a decade ago from central Ohio with optimism and career opportunities. But in the last few years, Nueding, 38, lost his job at Walmart and his wife, suffering from anxiety, left a well-paid position at Apple. They live in an old RV with a roommate along the streets of Fremont.

"It's just like being trapped in a corner," said Nueding, who holds a master's degree in literature.

They considered moving back to their hometown, but jobs are scarce and pay poorly. Nueding worries that a local school or university would not hire a homeless person to teach classes, even as a substitute. "Until I have an actual legal residence," he said, "I feel homeless."

Leslie, the Bay Area native in Los Gatos, lives with her husband in a farmhouse in the foothills. Each has more than an hour-long commute on good days.

Leslie has spent two decades in the tech industry and enjoys her job. Her mother and sister have already been priced out in the past few years. The Santa Cruz native would leave if other family members weren't still here.

She sees a dark side of Silicon Valley tech — U.S. engineers replaced by lower-cost H-1B visa holders. All workers suffer, she said: The system unfairly pushes down salaries, while foreign-born engineers remain heavily dependent on their employers.

Leslie said many of her friends, especially with young children, are overstressed. She sees them trying to ease the anxiety with prescription medication and therapy just to navigate daily life.

Leslie rides her three horses or goes to the beach with her four dogs to cope. But she's not sure how much longer that therapy will work.

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*The poll of 1,257 registered voters in Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and San Mateo counties, was conducted by FM3 Research for the Silicon Valley Leadership Group and Bay Area News Group. The poll, conducted Jan. 11-19, has a margin of error of +/- 2.8 percentage points.*

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