



Photo courtesy of Nuestra Casa



Nuestra Casa uplifts families in East Palo Alto and the mid-peninsula through community education, leadership development, and advocacy.

Nuestra Casa stands by their community's side to help them navigate institutions, build people power, and use their voice to shape a new, more equitable community. Their programs build leaders who transform their local community and are actively engaged in the local economy, school district, and civic life. Nuestra Casa envisions a vibrant mid-peninsula community united around shared values where every resident thrives and that will together build a community that leaves no one behind.

Nuestra Casa has a long track record of working with groups with a history of disproportionately less representation in local, county, and state policies and/or projects. These groups include but are not limited to: Spanish-speakers with limited English proficiency, recent immigrants, youth and elderly populations, unincorporated communities, and small independent organizations.



Project Description

Nuestra Casa conducted outreach related to Proposition 1, Integrated Regional Water Management Program, environmental justice, and water holistically in the East Palo Alto community. Their objective was to empower and support community members to define their own water-related issues, assets, and priorities through a community needs assessment process.

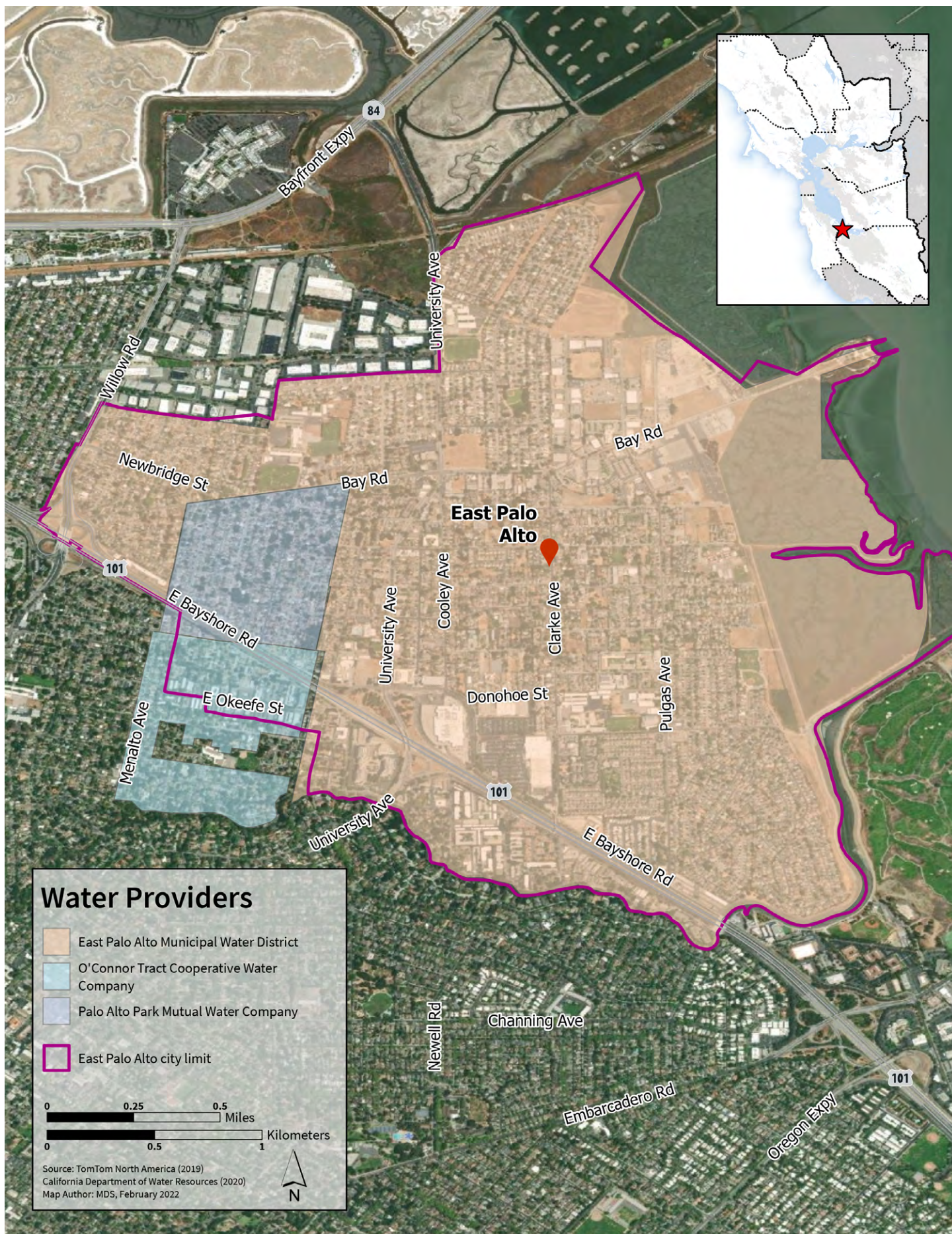
Background on East Palo Alto

Demographics

According to the 2019 American Community Survey Five-Year Data Profiles, East Palo Alto's population is 29,593, with a median age of 30.7 years. 66.1% of the population identify as Hispanic or Latino, and 33.9% as not Hispanic or Latino. 38% identify as white, 14.2% as Black or African American, 2.8% as American Indian and Native Alaskan, 6.3% Asian, and 5.2% Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander. 38.7% identify as some other race (U.S. Census, 2019).

As of 2019, East Palo Alto had San Mateo County's highest unemployment rate, and double the poverty rate of the greater county. Only 20% of residents have a college degree, and only about two thirds have graduated from high school. The job-per-person ratio works out to be 0.2 (compared to 3.04 jobs-per-person in the nearby City of Palo Alto), and these jobs tend to be lesser paying than in other areas (Layton & Johnson, 2019).

Much of East Palo Alto falls in the 85-90th percentile of the California Environmental Protection Agency's (CalEPA) CalEnviroScreen mapping tool, which identifies California communities by census tract that are disproportionately burdened by, and vulnerable to, multiple sources of pollution. CalEnviroScreen highlights the many challenges communities face in addition to and outside of income, the way communities are often designated as disadvantaged (CalEPA & OEHHA, 2017).



History of Environmental Injustice and Inequity in East Palo Alto

East Palo Alto was not incorporated until 1983, and many decisions made prior to incorporation have influenced its current resources and population. The 2019 “From Crisis to Solutions: A Case Study of East Palo Alto’s Water Supply” (Layton & Johnson, 2019) report explores how many of these decisions were inextricably connected to race and discriminatory policies. In the six decades of its efforts to become incorporated, East Palo Alto lost many resources to state development projects and neighboring cities. Early land use decisions in San Mateo and neighboring counties directed toxic industrial uses to East Palo Alto, including the San Mateo County landfill, a regional hazardous waste recycling plant, auto dismantling facilities, and pesticide and herbicide producers. One site, the Romic hazardous waste facility, which operated for 43 years until it was closed in 2007 in response to community pressure, caused soil and groundwater contamination 80 feet below ground level (Layton & Johnson, 2019).

In the 1930s, the road that became U.S. Highway 101 was built through East Palo Alto, bisecting the existing community. Subsequent highway widening displaced many businesses that served residents, few of which reopened within the City of East Palo Alto. In addition, other parts of the city’s industrial areas were annexed by neighboring cities, decreasing the population and property values. East Palo Alto has struggled against this history to build and maintain a tax base and a healthy balance between jobs and housing. While East Palo Alto has one of the highest population densities in Silicon Valley, many residents travel to work outside of East Palo Alto due to insufficient jobs in the city for the population and higher paying jobs elsewhere. This contributes to issues including traffic congestion and poor air quality. The rapidly transpiring climate emergency also has real implications for affordable housing in a region already experiencing a higher than average displacement rate, due to a rapidly growing technology sector attracting high-income-seekers from around the world (Layton & Johnson, 2019).

Water allocations made before the incorporation of East Palo Alto limited the City’s capacity to support economic development. As the population grew to one of the densest in Silicon Valley, its water supply allocation from the San Francisco Regional Water System (SFRWS) changed little. For the fiscal year 2013-2014, East Palo Alto had the lowest gross per capita consumption of the SFRWS’ wholesale customers but used far more of its water supply allocation than most other wholesale customers. Additionally, East Palo Alto does not have a secondary or emergency water source. Until recently when it secured 1.5 million additional gallons per day from Palo Alto and Mountain View, East Palo Alto was described as being in a water crisis; in other words, not having enough water supply to meet the growing population’s needs (Layton & Johnson, 2019). For a more in-depth description of the history of East Palo Alto, see “From Crisis to Solutions: A Case Study of East Palo Alto’s Water Supply” (Layton & Johnson, 2019).

Community-Identified Strengths and Assets

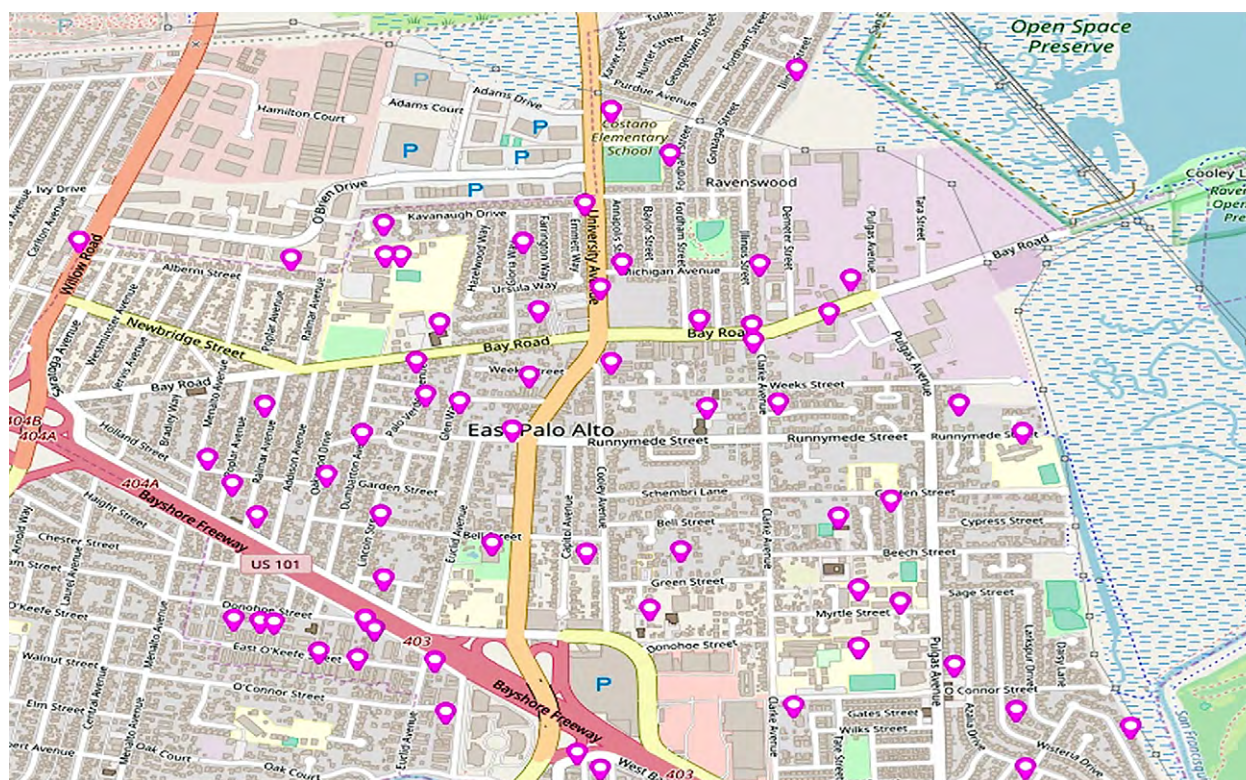
From the perspective of Nuestra Casa, one of the most noticeable strengths of their community in East Palo Alto is how the community comes together, not just in times of need. East Palo Alto is a community grounded in diversity and togetherness. Oftentimes, community members have a lot on their plate from dealing with issues related to housing affordability, food insecurity and mental health. Even with all these issues they face daily, community members continue to show up to meetings, forums, and workshops to have their voices be heard. Community members show up to these meetings to not only advocate for themselves but also for their families, for a better East Palo Alto. Community members go out of their way to educate themselves on the issues surrounding East Palo Alto and what actions they can take to help better their community. Nuestra Casa’s community understands the importance of showing up to these spaces to make real change happen within East Palo Alto.

Summary of Outreach and Education Efforts

Nuestra Casa conducted over 715 surveys in English and Spanish with residents in East Palo Alto at locations including Chavez Middle School, Belle Street Park, the Woodland Apartments, Midtown, the Village, Ravenswood Family Health Center, and at churches to better understand the community's water-related issues and priorities for solutions to address them. The survey Nuestra Casa deployed included questions about residents' top priority water issues, overall top issues to understand how water issues compare, and an open-ended question asking how residents would spend one million dollars to improve water issues in their community.

Nuestra Casa also held two listening sessions, one in English and one in Spanish, to facilitate conversations to gather more details about issues residents are experiencing and begin conversations about developing solutions.

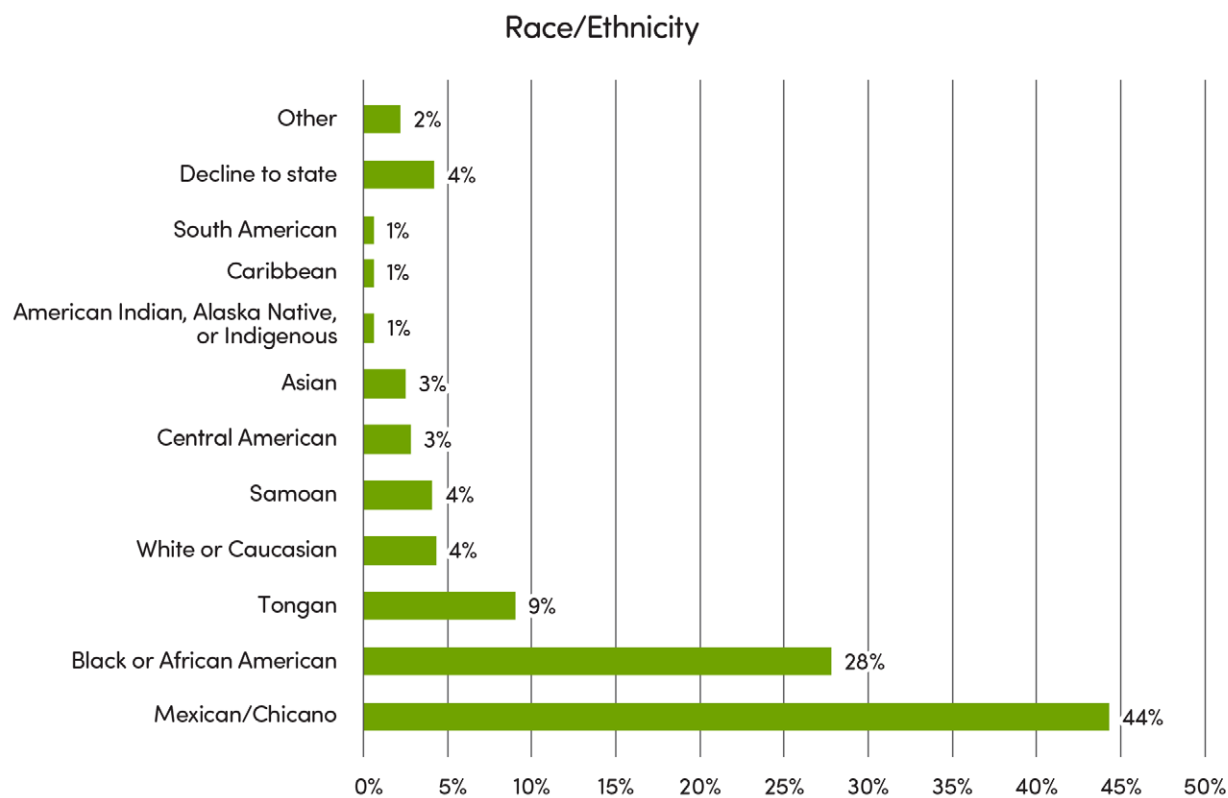
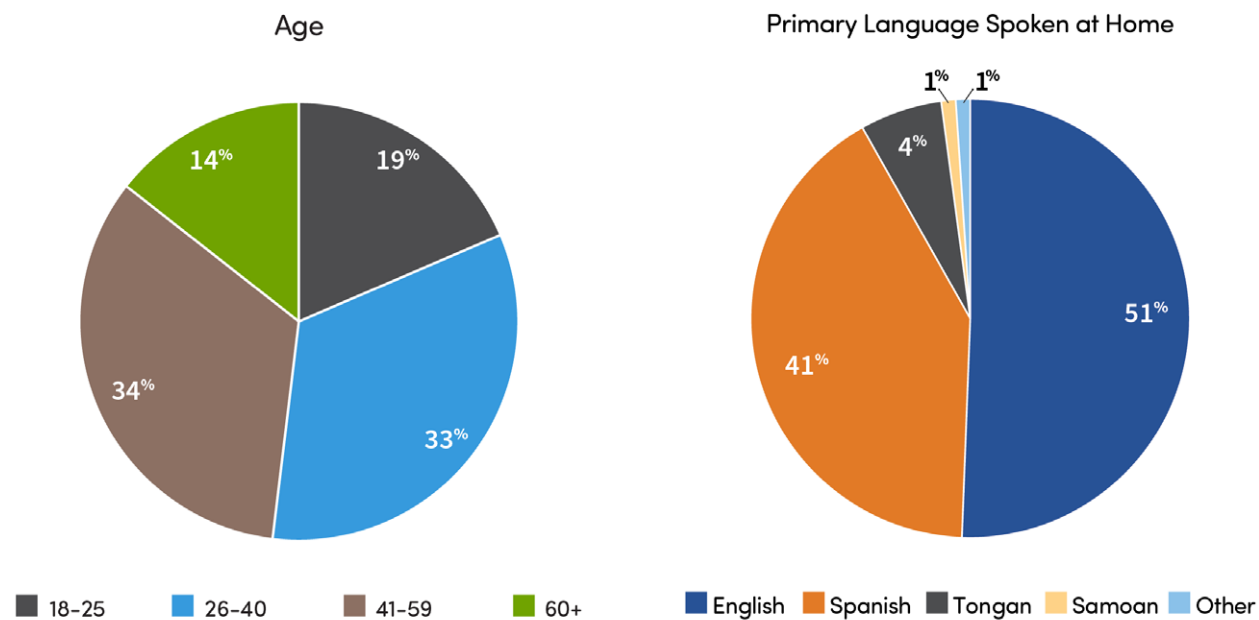
Throughout the needs assessment process, Nuestra Casa leveraged efforts with San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) and Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (BARHI) to engage the East Palo Alto community specifically around sea level rise and community health issues.



Map of locations in East Palo Alto where Nuestra Casa conducted surveys with residents.

Needs Assessment Findings

Demographics of Respondents



The top prioritized issues identified through the water needs survey are presented below, along with greater details and support from qualitative survey questions and the listening sessions.



Drinking Water Quality

Nuestra Casa’s needs assessment process identified an overwhelming perception that the water quality in East Palo Alto, at least in some locations, is not good. It also captured related concerns about the role of water infrastructure in the quality issues that respondents are experiencing.

Unsafe drinking water was the most identified water issue by survey respondents in East Palo Alto: 55.7% of respondents (397) did not feel drinking their tap water is safe, and 45.7% (326) of respondents indicated that their water tastes bad. Furthermore, when asked what they think about the quality of tap water in East Palo Alto, 41.8% of residents responded “bad,” and 42.1% responded “fair,” only 11.9% responded “good.” Perhaps most strikingly of all, almost three quarters (74.5%) of respondents buy water for cooking and drinking. Negative tap water quality experiences have prompted many people to buy bottled water, which is an extra expense, can cause major strain on already tight budgets, and causes additional issues for the environment. Some respondents mentioned concern about the negative environmental impact of plastic water bottles in response to the qualitative survey question, “If you had a million dollars to improve some water-related issue, how would you use it?”, as well as in the listening sessions.

Of the water issues identified in the needs assessment, water quality in particular ranks extremely highly in the minds of surveyed East Palo Alto residents with respect to overall community issues. When asked, “What conditions in East Palo Alto would most impact you, your family, and your community’s ability to get through difficult times or disasters?”—the second overall most chosen response was water quality (67.3% / 480), second only narrowly to housing affordability and stability in their home (68.4% / 488).

What do you think about the quality of tap water in East Palo Alto?	%	n (English/Spanish)
Bad	41.8%	298 (242/56)
Fair	42.1%	300 (168/132)
Good	11.9%	85 (48/37)
Other	2.8%	20 (10/10)

What conditions in East Palo Alto would most impact you, your family, and your community's ability to get through difficult times or disasters?	% (Rank)	n (English/Spanish)
Housing affordability and stability in your home	68.4% (1)	488 (353/135)
Water quality	67.3% (2)	480 (340/139)
Not enough money, jobs	36.9% (5)	263 (215/48)
Education	39.7% (4)	283 (204/79)
Access to health care and health insurance	39.8% (3)	284 (182/102)
Air quality	36.7% (6)	262 (153/109)
Immigration status, fear of ICE, etc.	34.5% (7)	246 (149/97)
Safety	32.8% (9)	234 (150/84)
Housing quality (including mold, lead, pests, dangerous conditions, etc.)	33% (8)	235 (143/92)
Access to healthy, affordable food	24.8% (11)	177 (130/47)
Power to influence decisions	20.9% (12)	149 (119/30)
Ongoing health conditions (like asthma, diabetes, blood pressure, etc.)	28.2% (10)	201 (111/90)
Transportation	14.4% (13)	103 (78/25)
Information not communicated in my language	12.9% (14)	92 (151/41)
Other	2.1% (15)	15 (13/2)

Many responses to the qualitative survey question, “If you had a million dollars to improve some water-related issue, how would you use it?” related to improving tap water quality and replacing old pipes. Specifically, many respondents said they would use the funding to improve water quality and conduct water testing to improve overall taste, safety, appearance, and quality, as well as implement a better filtration system, including answers of filters for houses/schools. Additionally, more affordable water and lower/ more equitable water bills were mentioned.

In the listening sessions, respondents identified specific tap water quality issues, including:

- Water appearance: brown, yellow, rusty, black, cloudy, contaminated
- Water smell or taste: tastes bad, smells bad, tastes or smells like chlorine, bleach
- Health issues resulting from exposure to water: rashes, burns on skin, hair falling out, burning eyes, etc.

In addition, respondents noted different water quality in different locations, observed that more expensive water is better quality, and that people buy water in addition to paying their water bill. Attendees also mentioned worry about the environmental effects of buying bottled water.

“The water in the school tastes like pain” —One of Nuestra Casa’s promotoras’ son speaking about the water at the primary school in East Palo Alto

“At certain times of the year water is brown or cloudy” —Anonymous resident of East Palo Alto



Infrastructure and Pipes

41.8% (298) of respondents mentioned concern about old infrastructure and pipes, specifically in the water distribution system. Many survey respondents said they would use the funding to improve water infrastructure and replace old pipes as well as improve and optimize the water distribution system. In the listening sessions, many participants mentioned worry about infrastructure and dirty pipes. There was a common perception that pipes contribute to experienced water contamination.



Flooding

The next most identified issue was flooding, noted by 38.6% of respondents (275). Many survey respondents said they would use the funding for flood control measures. In the listening sessions, many mentioned flooding. The school on Fordham Street and some corners on Gonzaga Street were specifically said to flood severely in the winter.



Drinking Water Supply

Drinking water supply, litter and trash, and industrial contamination were all also identified by over a quarter of respondents to the survey.

Of these common water issues, which have you identified in your community?	% (rank)	n (English/Spanish)
Unsafe drinking water	55.7% (1)	397 (288/109)
Flooding	38.6% (4)	275 (230/45)
Drinking water supply (amount)	34.5% (5)	246 (218/28)
Water tastes bad	45.7% (2)	326 (220/106)
Old infrastructure/pipes	41.8% (3)	298 (206/92)
Industrial contamination	23.8% (7)	170 (136/34)
Litter/trash	27.8% (6)	198 (133/65)

34.5% (246) respondents identified drinking water supply as an issue in East Palo Alto. In the listening sessions, many mentioned worries about the future supply of water. Participants specifically mentioned interest in recycled water/water reuse/rain capture, worry about dependency on other cities, and limited water supply being used for corporations rather than for community members.



Trash and Litter

23.8% (170) respondents identified litter and trash as an issue in East Palo Alto. In the listening sessions, many mentioned worries about litter and trash pickup and control, the need for better waste management, including more trash cans, and cleaning trash from storm drains.



Industrial Contamination

27.8% (198) respondents indicated that industrial contamination is an issue in East Palo Alto.

Information and Education

Other related issues brought up by respondents in the qualitative survey question and listening sessions were:

- A lack of transparency around how decisions are made and money is spent, and a desire for transparency around water quality and other issues affecting East Palo Alto
- The need for information and education programs for community members on water quality, water conservation, and environmental justice issues, as well as how to dispose of toxics and trash



Photo courtesy of Nuestra Casa

Next Steps

Participate in the DACTI Program Tap Water Quality Testing Effort and Follow up:

- Through the needs assessment process, community members provided many ideas about what to do to address the water quality issues they identified. Among the most frequently raised solutions, respondents asked for collaborative, transparent water quality testing, and more information and transparency about water quality, as well as fixing infrastructure/pipes to contribute to safe water delivery. Respondents also wanted good water for everyone and felt that people shouldn't have to pay more for good water. As a next step to follow up on this concern, Nuestra Casa has already begun working with the DACTI Program tap water quality testing effort to begin scoping the effort in East Palo Alto. Results from the tap testing effort will inform the development of solutions. Depending on the results of the testing, Nuestra Casa will also explore policy ordinances and other next steps.
- The water distribution system in East Palo Alto is particularly complicated relative to other communities in the Bay Area—while most communities usually have only one provider, in East Palo Alto there are three. The City of East Palo Alto has outsourced distribution of its wholesale Hetch-Hetchy water from the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (through the San Francisco Regional Water System) to a private company called Veolia. In addition, there are two municipal water companies: Palo Alto Park Mutual Water Company and the O'Connor Tract Municipal Water Company. Community concerns have previously been raised specific to the Palo Alto Park Mutual Water Company (The Almanac, 2019).



Photo courtesy of Nuestra Casa

Continue to work with and include an expanding proportion of the East Palo Alto community, as well as engage agencies and local government in conversations and the development of solutions to the needs identified in the assessment process

- More holistically understand the source of environmental threats to East Palo Alto residents, and understand the interaction between infrastructure—wastewater lines and waste lines—and water quality.
- Host solutions development conversations about tap water quality, flooding, and litter and trash, as well as provide more support for the community
- Continue to expand reach through the Environmental Justice Parent Academy training methodology, which ran its first session in the Fall of 2020
 - Nuestra Casa has trained three community members with proven facilitation skills to engage and work directly with parents as Promotoras (Community Climate Ambassadors).
 - Each of the three community members bring skill sets, and cultural understanding of the African American, Pacific Islander, and Latino communities. The Promotoras will help recruit parent participants, provide direct support to parents, and help connect them to community resources, which are translated into both Spanish and Tongan. Each Parent Academy serves 75 parents comprised of three groups of 25 members, with each group learning the fundamentals of environmental justice and climate change-related issues in their respective communities. Parents participate in the EJ Parent Academy for six weeks. To encourage a high level of engagement, participants receive a \$300 stipend for completing the EJ Parent Academy. During the parent workshops, the children of the families are engaged in a Youth Climate Academy, offered by Nuestra Casa's partner organization, Mycelium Youth Network. Youth engage in activities that promote environmental stewardship and at-home strategies that help reduce climate impacts, such as recycling, composting, water, and energy conservation, and more. Nuestra Casa envisions that the Academy will unlock solutions for more people, communities, and needs.

Build capacity through hiring expertise in water quality and infrastructure

- A top priority for Nuestra Casa is to build their capacity. This has been achieved by hiring another full-time staff member to focus on infrastructure, water quality and water testing, and the intersectionality between environmental justice and water quality. Additionally, our new staff member is working with Nuestra Casa to provide further educational materials, information, and support to the East Palo Alto community.

References

California Environmental Protection Agency and Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (2017, January). *CalEnviroScreen 3.0*. <https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen/report/calenviroscreen-30>

Layton, F.M., & Johnson, A.A. (2019). *From Crisis to Solutions: A Case Study of East Palo Alto's Water Supply*. Silicon Valley Community Foundation. <https://www.siliconvalleycf.org/sites/default/files/publications/east-palo-alto-water-report-reader.pdf>

United States Census Bureau (2019). *ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates 2019: ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles*. TableID: DP05. https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?g=0400000US06_1600000US0620956&tid=ACSDP5Y2019.DP05

The Almanac (2019, July 31). Troubled Water: Water company in East Palo Alto and Menlo Park faces allegations of election fraud and company mismanagement. Almanac News. [Troubled Water | News | Almanac Online | \(almanacnews.com\)](https://www.almanacnews.com/news/2019/07/31/troubled-water/)