

KoreaTown-Northgate CultureFest draws thousands to district

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OAKLAND — TheSaturday scene was a lot to take in at the first KoreaTown-Northgate CultureFest.

There was hip hop music on one end of the fest, a band doing Santana cover tunes on the other and smoke from the Korean barbecue wafting through the air all along the Telegraph Avenue fair.

Mangos on a stick, shiny pork piled onto tostadas and hulking husks of corn grilling on an open fire were for sale as vendors sold colorful Oaklandish T-shirts, African jewelry, and handmade Mexican pottery.

In fact, there was so much going on that artists Laura Odell Usher and Lisa Rasmussen set up their "art cart" on the corner of 26th and Telegraph so people could recharge by making a piece of art and adding it to their growing street gallery.

"People should come over and take a break... take a art break," said Usher, who has overseen the two-month project that has produced about 1,000 pieces of art.

The art cart is stocked with paper, crayons, paint, pens and charcoal for people to make art by answering the question: "What does home mean to you?"

"It's free art therapy on the streets," said Rasmussen.

The festival was the first of its kind in the district and designed to bring the diverse neighborhood of African Americans, Koreans, Filipinos, Europeans and Middle Easterners together, said Alex Hahn, president of the KoreaTown-Northgate Community Benefit District.

Oakland is a diverse city so we have to get together to help each other," he said. "If you look at Chinatown they have been here a long time and are very successful. The ethnic towns are the core for Oakland.

But the festival was not supported by everyone in the district.

Gene Hazzard, a photographer with the Oakland Post, Akilah Zainabu, a district merchant, and resident Lee Cherry, signed a letter earlier this month calling for sponsors to pull out of the festival because of the "unrest in the community due to the street banners" that were hung in April by the benefit district.

The banners, which read "KoreaTown-Northgate: Oakland's got Seoul" are "discriminatory, biased, offensive and inherently racist. They do not reflect the cultural diversity of the area and have created an environment of hostility," the letter says.

"The signs have to come down,' said Cherry, who is black. "The mix of people in the area is too diverse to have it say KoreaTown."

Cherry said a petition with more than 1,000 signatures calls for the removal of the banners. He said he did not know if any sponsors had pulled out of the fair because of the controversy.

Many at the festival said they were happy to be there. "I think for a first-year festival, it looks good. I put a

sign (outside my booth) saying I speak Spanish because I've noticed a lot of Hispanic families walking around," said Gabrielle Lessard, a native English speaker who runs Mangosteen, a handmade jewelry company.

Also at the festival was Trina Helmke promoting the 81-year-old Neldam's Danish Bakery on Telegraph Avenue. She said that Neldam's has moved from using almond paste to using green tea and red bean pastes to satisfy Asians and Hispanics. "The community is changing so Neldam's is changing right along with it but still keeps traditional values and flavors."