

# Racism Charges Cloud Vote on Coast

Special to The New York Times

**EAST PALO ALTO, Calif., Aug. 2** — On the west side of the Bayshore Freeway, University Avenue is a tree-lined drive of half-million-dollar houses and thriving businesses that ends on the sprawling grounds of Stanford University.

East of the freeway, University Avenue offers up a different scene: the empty, decaying buildings that once were the Nairobi Shopping Center, a deserted recreation center whose swimming pool stands empty as it has been for six summers and the closed high school, a reminder that local teenagers now take buses to schools all over the county.

But everywhere there are also signs of hope, from the immaculate buildings that house the Mount Olive Church of God and the Asamblea Apostolica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús to the new library with its sign proclaiming, "Every month is Black History Month."

On June 7, in an election that has come to represent both the failures and the hopes of East Palo Alto, this community of 18,000 people 40 miles south of San Francisco voted to change its status from an unincorporated area governed by the County Board of Supervisors to an incorporated city. At the same time, it elected a City Council of four blacks and one Hispanic man that, in turn, chose a black woman as the city's Mayor.

## A 15-Vote Margin

Incorporation was approved by only 15 votes, and whether that election will stand has been cast into doubt. Today the battle over the issue moved to the San Mateo County Superior Court in Redwood City, where 10 citizens accusing incorporation supporters of vote fraud seek to have Judge John Cruikshank overturn the election results.

Had East Palo Alto been mostly white, "we never would have had trouble like this," said Mayor Barbara Mouton, contending that those opposed to incorporation thought "a predominantly minority city doesn't have the intellectual skills to make its own management decisions."

Those favoring incorporation, organized as the East Palo Alto Citizens' Committee on Incorporation, also charge that the anti-incorporation drive is led and financed by absentee landlords and developers who have a financial interest in the status quo.

Opponents of incorporation, under the name Citizens Coalition Against Incorporation Now, charge that members of the pro-incorporation committee tampered with ballots. As many as 150 votes may be in question, according to the coalition's lawyer, former United States Representative Paul N. McCloskey Jr.

The trial, which is expected to last two weeks, began today with testimony by the chief deputy county clerk, Robert Casper, as to the handling of absentee ballots. Mr. Casper said a greater number of people voted by absentee ballot in the June 7 election than in other recent elections. He said clerks in the election office had been instructed to check the voters' signatures on the ballots with those on their voter registration forms to see if they were reasonable facsimiles.

## Mayor Disputes Fraud Charge

District Attorney James Fox said the Federal Justice Department had begun an investigation. The United States Attorney in San Francisco would neither confirm nor deny that.

Because she is named in the suit as one of the four people favoring incorporation who were elected to the City Council, Mayor Mouton would not com-

ment extensively on the allegations. She did, however, say that "there was no voter fraud" and described individuals who said their ballots had been mis-handled as "not too tightly wrapped." Mrs. Mouton said she was frustrated that the election battle was using energy better spent on improving conditions in the community.

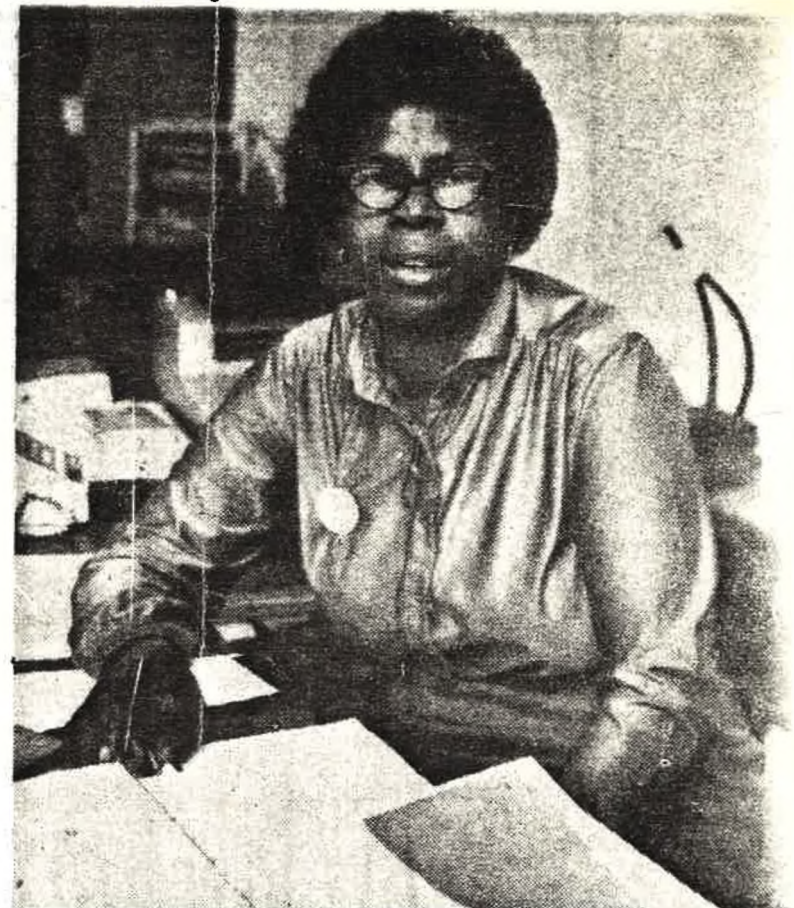
East Palo Alto seems in every way to be the poor stepchild of its affluent neighbors. While San Mateo County ranks 19th in the nation in income per person, officials here estimate the unemployment rate in East Palo Alto to be 25 to 30 percent. Although the new city holds less than 4 percent of the county's population, it represents nearly 30 percent of the county's welfare cases and 26 percent of the crimes reported to the Sheriff's Department.

## Finances Are at Issue

The racial makeup of its population differs vastly from the rest of the county, which is 80 percent white. East Palo Alto is 61 percent black, 14 percent Hispanic and 20 percent white.

Arn Cenedella, a leader in the coalition against incorporation, says the only issue is the financial feasibility of incorporation. Citing the lack of commercial development or a business district in the city, he argues that there is an insufficient tax base to support a city government and services.

Ruben Abrica, the Hispanic candidate elected to the City Council, argues that East Palo Alto can be a viable city even if it can never afford the level of services offered by its neighbors. Such services as utilities, police and fire protection, and parks and recreation are now provided by the county and 11 separate special districts; Mr. Abrica notes that under state law the county must continue to provide basic services for a year following incorporation, al-



The New York Times/Terrance McCart

Barbara Mouton, Mayor of the newly incorporated East Palo Alto, Calif.

lowing time for an orderly transition.

Mr. Abrica said one benefit of incorporation would be a local police force, in the hope that a lower crime rate might encourage business and light industry. "It's a vicious cycle that needs to be broken somewhere," he said.

Cityhood, Mr. Abrica argues, will mean tougher enforcement of health and safety codes. One of the first ac-

tions taken by the new City Council was to pass an emergency ordinance establishing a 90-day moratorium on rent increases during which the city plans to establish a "Renter's Bill of Rights" to address problems faced by tenants.

Mr. Abrica feels the community ready for self-government. "What we gain by staying the way we are," he said.