

A supermarket would nourish East P.A.'s revival

For the past year or so, Stewart Hyland has been amused to notice the number of developers sitting quietly in East Palo Alto City Council meetings, trying to scope out the political lay of the land. Suddenly, community groups are being courted by people who wouldn't even drive into the city six years ago.

Hyland, a leader of the Peninsula Interfaith Action coalition of community churches, is getting a kick out of East Palo Alto's newfound clout. "Things sure have changed," he said, laughing. "Everybody

seems very interested in being here these days."

So, with all the corporate romancing going on, why can't East Palo Alto manage to get its own grocery store?

It's fine that residents can run over to Home Depot for lumber and even get a cup of coffee at Starbucks. But why should they have to go outside the city just to stock up for a neighborhood Super Bowl party?

Several groups in town are opti-



suehutchison

mistic for the first time in years that they will be able to get a store in town, though the big chains have turned them down in the past. But Hyland, for one, doesn't care if the major supermarkets don't

come knocking.

"A lot of people are fed up with Safeway and Albertson's because of the way they've dissed us in the past," he said. "If we could get a smaller store, say 30,000 square feet or so, that would be fine."

The yearning for a local place to buy groceries goes beyond the obvious need for convenience. In many communities, the grocery store has become a sort of secular church. There's a lot that goes on between putting kids in the shopping cart and loading up on Lean Cuisines. People become accustomed to seeing one another there. It reminds them of who their neighbors are.

And if East Palo Alto does get its own supermarket, does that mean

See HUTCHISON, Page 6B

11/30/02

HUTCHISON | Supermarket needed

Continued from Page 1B

only city residents will shop there? Conventional wisdom says few people from outside the city will venture into the downtown area, but they would come if the store were in a "border" area, right off the highway.

A supermarket might be one sure way to bust through the "island mentality" that has separated East Palo Alto from neighboring cities even as it has made huge strides forward in recent years. Some people from Palo Alto and Menlo Park might be willing to make a quick drive for groceries in East Palo Alto if it means avoiding parking nightmares at nearby stores or plunking down a week's salary for the gourmet wares at Whole Foods or Andronico's.

Meanwhile, East Palo Alto has been changing so much from the inside that a grocery store might introduce resi-

dents to one another in a way the city's scores of churches and community groups can't. Let's face it, the basic need for trash bags, decent tomatoes, dishwashing detergent and boneless chicken breasts can be a great equalizer among neighbors.

"East Palo Alto is a lot more diverse now than it used to be," Hyland said. "There are

people buying houses here who have never lived in the city before. A grocery store would be a pretty good way for people to meet and find out who else lives here."

Of course, a supermarket does not have the major revenue-producing force of an Ikea store or a Home Depot. The question is whether city leaders will think it's important enough for the community to push it through even as other developers clamor to build on East Palo Alto's prime commercial real estate.

"At this point, we're pretty

sure we can make it happen," Hyland said. "The question is where and how soon."

But the city's history is pockmarked with similar gung-ho predictions that never came true. This opportunity is too good and too rare to waste.

Contact Sue Hutchison at shutchison@sjmercury.com or (650) 688-7593.



suehutchison