

EDITORIALS

Let the people decide

TONIGHT THE East Palo Alto City Council has an opportunity to ask city residents some very important questions:

Do they want a compromise settlement of the ongoing battle over rent control?

Do they want to pay higher taxes for better city services, including police protection?

To get definitive legal answers to those questions the council will have to place measures addressing both issues on the city's November ballot. Tonight is the council's last chance to set the procedural wheels in motion to qualify either measure for the ballot.

A group of landlords has proposed a compromise that embraces the notion of "vacancy decontrol." When a unit is vacated, it may be offered at fair-market rent, but as soon as it is occupied again its rent is fully controlled in accordance with the existing ordinance. Decontrol cannot occur as a result of eviction, unless the eviction results from non-payment of the rent.

To mollify concerns that this system would gradually make all housing units unaffordable, the proposal stipulates that at least 20 percent of the units of each property must either remain fully controlled or be made available to a low-income subsidy program.

The proposal would still prevent the most egregious abuse of renters — raising the rent significantly and often for the same tenant. But it would create a distinctly different investment climate for East Palo Alto, which would almost certainly lead to more housing construction and redevelopment, which in turn would enhance the city's tax base.

Vacancy decontrol could help that long-range process, but the city budget needs help in the short term, and that's why the tax override measure deserves a spot on the ballot. The City Council is already considering a utilities tax and/or a storage facility tax to cover an anticipated deficit in the coming year's budget. But residents have repeatedly called for better police protection and other services. Only through a supplemental tax could an actual enhancement of services be made.

As long as citizens are told how many years the tax would last — presumably while long-term economic development took hold — and for what purposes the extra funds would be put, there's a chance voters would accept the idea.

Both ideas have the potential of solving two major, related problems for the city. But they can't be undertaken without voters' approval. We urge the City Council tonight to put both matters to the citizenry in November.