

# Political, legal fights trouble community

Times Tribune staff

With four months to go before its first anniversary, the city of East Palo Alto already has engaged in more political and legal battles than most Peninsula cities have in the past few years.

Staunch incorporation opponents file lawsuits, circulate petitions and make threats against every major move by the new City Council.

The result for residents is a confusing series of events that often is impossible to follow.

Following is a summary of the major events since incorporation June 7:

- The incorporation vote itself brought the first lawsuit. Those opposing incorporation charged the election was a fraud, votes had been forged and ballots had been tampered with. However, a Superior Court judge upheld the election in October, dismissing all accusations as unfounded. One month later, incorporation opponents filed an appeal in San Francisco; it is pending.

- The City Council enacted a 90-day emergency rent freeze in July, and later extended it to Dec. 27. The freeze prohibited rent increases for all units in the city.

- On Nov. 23., the City Council voted 4-1 in favor of a two-year rent-control ordinance that would hold rent increases to the rate of inflation. After an extensive report from a city-appointed task force, the council decided that protecting tenants from skyrocketing rent increases was a necessary step, despite the wrath of landlords. The referendum also established a rent board to mediate disputes and a clause to ensure "just cause" for evictions.

- On Dec. 23, a group of residents, supported by Councilwoman Gertrude Wilks and the city's landlords, filed a referendum petition against the Nov. 23 ordinance. The petition, with more than 2,000 signatures, argued that rent control would scare away potential investors and thereby prevent the city from

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developing an adequate tax base. The referendum measure forced the council to place the rent-control issue on the April 10 ballot. In the meantime, it suspended the Nov. 23 ordinance.

- At about the time the referendum was filed, the same group of residents and landlords began collecting signatures for an initiative, with hopes of getting it on the June ballot. The initiative, which still is circulating, is a vaguely worded but comprehensive document that would effectively forbid the City Council and successive councils from tampering with private property values.

- Confronted by the referendum and acting on the premise that landlords would raise rents before the April 10 ballot, the council passed an "urgency" rent-control ordinance that prohibits rent increases greater than 8 percent. The urgency measure remains in effect until the election.

- In response to the urgency ordinance, the landlords filed a lawsuit against the city, charging that it had violated state election code laws. They argued that the urgency ordinance is virtually the same ordinance as the one suspended Nov. 23. Both should be suspended by the referendum, they said.

- Last week, the same group behind the referendum and initiative drives began an attempt to recall Mayor Barbara Mouton, Vice Mayor James Blakey, and council members Ruben Abrica and Omowale Satterwhite. The four named in the recall petition — who refer to the recall drive as "another form of harassment" — must respond to the charges within seven days. Residents will have an opportunity to read the charges and responses before they sign the recall petition.