

Top planner's top plan: save East Palo Alto

But San Mateo's new chairman expects no fast changes there

By Don West
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EAST PALO ALTO — The new chairman of the San Mateo County Planning Commission does not back away from tough tasks, but there is one key responsibility he would like to see taken away from him and his fellow commissioners.

Omwale Satterwhite, who took over the chair on Wednesday after nearly two years on the board, would like to see the 2½ square miles of his own home town turned over to its own municipal government.

Satterwhite, 40, the first black to be named to the commission, already has seen his share of controversies since his appointment.

The Local Coastal Plan, the revision of the housing element of the general plan, the Skyline Study and many others required long study and long, heated hearings. He and the other unpaid commissioners had to spend up to 40 hours a month wrestling with the controversies.

And such proposals as returning complete control of the county's coastal areas to the Planning Commission, now being suggested by Gov. Deukmejian, don't faze him: "I do not believe that the philosophies for protection of our coast would change, given the present commission and Board of Supervisors."

Satterwhite is president of the Community Development Institute, which helps set up non-profit organizations. He didn't start out to be a development specialist or planner.

Now married and the father of three children, he came to the area in 1967 to attend Stanford and get a degree in education.

Starting as a student volunteer, he later became assistant superintendent of the Ravenswood Elementary School District and helped organize Nairobi College.

He left town for 18 months in 1970 and 1971 to work at Oberlin College in Ohio to get some practical experience in urban education, which he felt



OMWALE SATTERWHITE
New commission chairman

"But I think even before I left town, I knew that I would return and what I really wanted to do was community development work," he recalled.

Active in the Urban Coalition and youth affairs, he won election to the East Palo Alto Municipal Council. His experiences on that body, which advises the Board of Supervisors on local issues, made him believe that only self determination could make the community work right.

He feels his hometown can never catch up with neighboring communities until local people are granted control and responsibility for developing a new city there.

After only one term, he quit the Municipal Council to help organize a local drive to incorporate the area into the 20th city in San Mateo County.

The community of 18,000 poor to middle-class residents, most of whom are black, is located at the western approach to Dumbarton Bridge in a corner surrounded by burgeoning industrial and commercial development fueled by Silicon Valley's seemingly endless round of new technologies.

Satterwhite contends his hometown has been passed by because of a fragmentation of responsibility for services.

Fire, water, garbage, sanitation, lighting and recreation services are all provided through separate special districts with separate boards. The county provides law enforcement, road and general services.

"There is no one coordinated agency to help things get started, or promote our community, and even if there was promotion, we couldn't build anything new right now," he said.

The sanitation district, which has kept sewer rates low and not kept its system up to date, placed a freeze on sewer hookups, making new construction impossible.

Noting that local residents spend more than \$100 million a year outside their community, Satterwhite argues that only a unified effort by a locally controlled government can build a commercial center to keep the dollars at home.

Appointed to the commission in March 1981 by Supervisor Arlen Gregorio, Satterwhite quickly developed a reputation as a man who did his homework.

His carefully outlined stands often became a rallying point for one side or another as the issues were debated.

When the commission held its annual reorganizational session at the opening of Wednesday's meeting, he was elected by fellow commissioners to take over the gavel from Lore Radisch.

Commissioner Aldo Silvestri of Pescadero was elected vice chairman.

"Most of the big, controversial issues have already been sent on to the supervisors, but we still have lots of work for this year," said Satterwhite.

Revision and modernizing of the county's general plan, which has been postponed again and again for more pressing matters, will probably be the biggest task.

But he remains hopeful that by the middle of the year, at least one task, planning for East Palo Alto, will be removed from his commission's jurisdiction and handed over to his neighbors.

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