

Times Tribune Staff Photo by Bob Andres

Councilwoman Gertrude Wilks spoke for most people in the audience Monday night when she told a developer his condominium conversion proposal is not good for the people of East Palo Alto.

East Palo Altans close the door on condominiums

By Judy Miller
Times Tribune Staff

EAST PALO ALTO — This community, surrounded by cities experiencing fast-paced condominium conversions, has placed thick political walls of resistance at its borders after its first go-round with conversion proponents.

After nodding in agreement at most of the anti-conversion sentiment expressed by tenants, members of the East Palo Alto Municipal Council Monday night unanimously turned thumbs down on the first condo conversion proposed here.

"We ought to make it clear that you are not helping the families of this community (because) there will be very few people who would be able to afford this housing," said council member Gertrude Wilks, staring directly at developer Maury Broner of Westpark Ltd.

Like disciples at a revival meeting agreeing on an indisputable truth, the audience murmured and openly cheered its agreement following the comment. The council responded in turn by voting, with no hesitation, to slam the door on conversion of the 222-unit Westpark Garden Apartments, 1950 Cooley Ave.

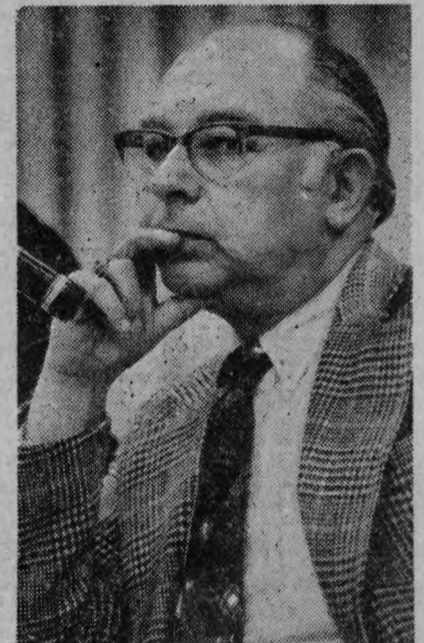
But tenants opposed to the conversion aren't out of the woods yet, because the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors always has the final word on matters affecting this 19,000-member unincorporated community. The county Planning Commission is to consider the conversion at its 8 a.m. meeting Wednesday. County planners have urged its approval.

East Palo Alto Municipal Council Chairman Brad Stamper said he would ask the commission to turn down the conversion.

The council veto of Westpark's conversion came despite the possibility developers could sue if their application is vetoed by the county. Broner said he would "like to talk to legal counsel" about a possible suit if rejected because the county has encouraged his San Jose-based firm to proceed with the conversion and held up its application for more than a year.

The Board of Supervisors last month specifically exempted Westpark Gardens and three other projects from a countywide conversion moratorium because the developers had filed an application before last October, when the ban was approved.

Community reluctance to join in the Peninsula's condominium craze



Staff Photo by Bob Andres
Maury Broner

centers on the fear that the low-to-moderate income population here would be forced out of the community if faced with a spate of conversions.

"I'm living in Westpark because it's a place I can afford," said tenant Jean Prescott, who pays \$285 monthly for a one bedroom apartment. "I would definitely have to leave (if the conversion were approved)."

Tenants also asked where they could find moderately priced rental housing in a county with a vacancy rate hovering at under 1%.

"They (Westpark owners) are going to be aggravating an already serious housing crunch," said tenant Joel R. Cooper.

But Broner argued that his condominiums would provide some of the lowest priced ownership housing in the area, with price tags ranging from \$55,000 to \$122,000.

At the county's urging, Broner said, the developers have agreed to allow tenants first rights to purchase, give senior citizen tenants life-long leases and pay displaced tenants a \$750 relocation fee. The developer also is attempting to find financing allowing 5% down payments and 30-year mortgages for buyers.

Another condominium project ran into trouble Monday night after the council and county disagreed over whether a strip of Cooley Avenue on the east side of Bayshore should be used for commercial or residential purposes.