

# Local News

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Business ..... B-9  
 Comment ..... B-2,3  
 Obituaries ..... B-7  
 Stocks ..... B-10

## Election shows landlord group's weakness

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Tuesday's election in East Palo Alto was more than a victory for the four City Council members supporting rent control. The vote not only demonstrated their ability to get supporters to the polls, it also highlighted the landlord group's inability to deliver votes.

The pro-rent control, pro-incorporation people now have the momentum. If their opponents had problems rallying votes Tuesday, they could find it more difficult to get support for a broader property-rights initiative and the recall campaign being

### Analysis

waged against the four council members. On Tuesday, 1,522 (58.8 percent) voted in favor of rent control and 1,065 (41.2 percent) voted against it. Of the city's 9,424 registered voters, 27.5 percent cast ballots.

The landlords and a group of residents tried to win the rent-control election by targeting homeowners on the east side of the city. Rent control, they argued in five mailers, would discourage investment and con-

struction in the community and place a greater tax burden on homeowners. Property values eventually would fall.

"Rent control is a slum law," the landlords' literature said.

The homeowners, however, did not respond. On the east side of Bayshore Freeway, where most of the homeowners reside, voters passed the rent law with 872 "yes" votes and 840 "no" votes, a 32-vote margin. On the west side, where most of the residents are tenants, the measure passed 477 to 149, or by 328 votes.

The absentee-ballot count added 173 votes in favor and 76 ballots against. To add insult to injury, the landlord

group, the East Palo Alto Private Property Rights Committee, spent more than \$70,000 to fight rent control, compared with about \$550 used by the winners.

Robert Saunders, an East Palo Alto landlord who is president of the Palo Alto Park Association, said the landlords met Wednesday evening to analyze the election and plot strategy for the coming weeks.

"We discovered that the opposition has a well-formed political organization and they outorganized us," Saunders said.

Jack Orr, a San Diego-based political consultant hired by the landlords to win

the election, believes the tenants tipped the scale in favor of rent control. The election was a "classic example of the greedy tenant," Orr said.

He said the landlords were forced to sell a "fairly complicated economic argument" to homeowners, which he acknowledged is an ineffective way to bring voters to the polls. Tenants voting for rent control, on the other hand, believed they were putting cash in their pockets.

Two other factors contributed to the landlords' defeat. First, they ostracized

Please see RENT, B-8

## RENT

Continued from B-1

many homeowners who opposed the measure.

The campaign to stop rent control relied primarily on professionals to deliver votes. Members of the homeowners' association in the city who opposed rent control felt left out of the fight.

"(The landlords) didn't give the people the impression they were running the show. The impression they gave was that landlords were running the show," one member of the homeowners' group said.

The feeling appeared to confirm a long-standing argument of rent-control advocates — that "outsiders" were trying to run the city.

In addition, Councilwoman Gertrude Wilks, the top vote getter in the council election last summer, did little campaigning. Although she did lend her name and picture to the property-rights committee for mailers, she was not personally involved in the fight. Wilks and homeowners opposed to the ordinance kept a low profile and that pushed the absentee landlords out on center stage.

Despite the loss, Wilks and the landlords' group still believe rent control is a bad law for East Palo Alto.

"We'll self-destruct," Wilks said Tuesday.

Orr and Erick Haggans, chairman of the property-rights committee, said they have greater resolve than ever to fight the City Council.

"East Palo Alto can't afford rent control," Haggans said.

"I see (East Palo Alto) from now on in a state of war — lawsuit after lawsuit and election after election," Orr said.

Orr said the issue for investors and landlords boils down to "whether the property owner has the right to do what he wants with his property." He said landlords will fight for that right tirelessly.

However, landlords' groups thus far seem to be ineffective in combating City Council prerogatives in East Palo Alto.

Although an appeal is pending, a suit challenging incorporation was struck down in Superior Court. Most likely, no ruling will come down on the appeal for another year.

With the rent-control election lost, the landlords turn to a sweeping property-rights initiative as their next move. But that may never reach the ballot. The city attorney has said the initiative is unconstitutional and a repeat of the rent-control referendum. The City Council, taking the attorney's advice, could reject the initiative.

As for the recall campaign, little has been done so far. A serious move to unseat four council members could be determined by the coming political months. If the council proves vulnerable to attack, the recall backers will lead the way.

P.T.T. 4-12-84