

# Ravenswood District's struggle for power

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EAST PALO ALTO — School districts often are not perceived as important agencies in themselves. But in a struggling community like East Palo Alto, any public agency with access to large amounts of money and resources becomes a center of power.

As investigators of the San Mateo County Grand Jury are likely to discover, there are twisting,

interlocking alliances between community leaders in the unincorporated area.

Playing the game earns a share of the power, according to some in the community.

And, as one close observer mentioned, "there are people over here who really like power."

Rocking the boat means getting dumped, observers said. That is what happened to Superintendent Luther Seabrook of the Ravens-

wood City Elementary School District.

The county grand jury has been investigating various financial decisions and actions of the Ravenswood City Elementary School District for about a week.

Sources in and out of the district said Seabrook committed the sin of taking no sides.

As a result, a triad of Ravenswood trustees voted not to renew

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his contract last September, despite Seabrook's reputation and evidence in state test scores of the district's educational progress.

The reason given was that elections in November would bring a new board, which deserved the option of retaining Seabrook or choosing a new superintendent.

In fact, sources said, Seabrook was ousted because he demoted one trustee's husband, did not aid another's bid to be board president, and objected to the free use of school facilities by other agencies.

Sources said Seabrook refused to back Trustee Barbara Hatton's bid for a term as board president in December 1978.

Six months later, the superintendent demoted Vice Principal Bruce Haggans, husband of Trustee Pamela Haggans, to a teaching spot from a vice principal's position.

It was later discovered Haggans did not possess the correct credential to serve in the position.

Seabrook transgressed in other

areas, apparently bucking East Palo Alto Municipal Council members Gerturde Wilks and Barbara Mouton.

According to sources, children enrolled in Wilks' Nairobi Day School were having their hot lunches sent over from Ravenswood district kitchens.

One source said the unpaid cafeteria bill grew to \$5,000 to \$7,000 in the course of a year.

Seabrook demanded the practice stopped until payment was made.

Seabrook also demanded that a group of senior citizens, led by Mouton, begin to pay rent for the two rooms they occupied in the Euclid Avenue district building since November 1978.

A four-year contract at \$287 a month was ready by July 1979. Rental payments were to be made starting Dec. 1.

Apparently no rent was to be charged for the year the senior group occupied the rooms.

Ravenswood business manager Gerald Walters acknowledged last month that no one representing the senior center had come to sign the contract.

As yet, the district has not received any rent on the space, which

is still occupied by the senior citizens.

Seabrook apparently angered board members in other, more subtle ways.

One district insider said Seabrook acted as a "buffer" between board members and district teachers and workers.

By September, three of the five board members agreed to vote against a contract renewal for Seabrook.

At a Sunday morning meeting Sept. 30, Board President Mel Harris, Hatton and Haggans voted not to renew the superintendent's contract.

Maverick trustee Kendall Simmons voted against the motion and Trustee Nathaniel Brooks was absent, although he left word he would abstain.

Hatton apparently had to travel all the way from Atlanta, Ga., to vote. According to office workers at the University of Atlanta and Stanford, where she previously worked, Hatton had lived and worked in Atlanta for at least a month prior to the vote.

Except for Simmons' queries, the board never questioned the validity of her vote.

One month later, the board learned that Haggans' husband did not possess the proper credential to hold an administrative post in the district.

A confidential opinion from the board's attorney stated that all money paid to Haggans legally should be recovered.

After a copy of the letter was sent to the Times Tribune, Board President Mel Harris warned district employees that their jobs may be in jeopardy if they talked to the press.

Since then trustees have apparently taken no action to recover the funds.

This, sources said, was the catalyst triggering the grand jury investigation. Since then, it is apparently investigating the board's \$10,000 payment to an Oakland law firm to research a possible suit against the county for the widening of Bay Road.

At least one source indicated trustees were pressured into the possible lawsuit by community leaders angry over the county's decision.