

EAST PALO ALTO

Residents elect new board majority

Changes lie ahead for small water company

The first thing that will happen is an audit. Sometime after that, Katherine Loudd may be looking for a new job. And soon residents of a part of East Palo Alto may see the potholes on their streets disappear.

Those are the likely results of last week's election of three new board members to govern the Palo Alto Park Mutual Water Company, which serves about 600 East Palo Alto homes.

"We're really excited," said Carrie Robinson, one of the chief organizers of the challenge to Loudd, the water company's manager. "The win was a landslide."

Of the 1,121 votes cast in the election, 767 went to the slate consisting of John Chavez, Debra Turner and Paul Sposato. The other slate, composed of Albert Mitchell, Joseph Roman and Don Wallace, got 354 votes.

Robinson said the election was necessary. "It was just unworkable," she said of the water company. "We tried to work together."

She also thinks Loudd's job may soon be vacant. "I think she knows what will happen," Robinson said.

"The audit will be one of the first things that's done," said Chavez, one of the three newly elected members of the five-member board. "We wanted a complete financial audit, but that was never supported. And then there's the streets."

The streets are the ones in East Palo Alto's Midtown area which have deep potholes and have to be driven over very slowly.

The dispute between Loudd and city officials over paving the streets was one of the reasons residents banded together to defeat the slate of candidates she supported. Loudd had contended that it is the city's responsibility to pave the streets, which are owned by the company.

Others didn't much care who owns the streets, as long as they get fixed.

Loudd, who makes \$48,000 a year, angered many residents by how she handled some water company policies. City officials say she is difficult to deal with.

And Chavez knows about that firsthand. A longtime East Palo Alto resident and a faculty member at Cal State Hayward, Chavez was asked by Loudd to take a seat on the water company board five years ago.

Then, after he spoke out at a meeting about how some policies need to be reviewed or changed, he wasn't on the board anymore. Loudd didn't support him in the election.

"I noticed a couple of things that had to be changed," he said. There were no performance reviews of employees, the manager's salary seemed to be too high, and district-owned vacant land was not being used, he said.

"My suggestions were not well taken," Chavez admitted.

That was five years ago. Since then, there have been what he said were individual battles against the company until people began to unite.

Loudd declined to talk to the Weekly.

Vice Mayor Sharifa Wilson said she was pleased by the election results. "The shareholders got what they wanted," she said.

Now, there is the likelihood that the water company and city will work together to fix the badly damaged streets. "We were willing to do that from the beginning," Wilson said. "I'm looking forward to a cooperative partnership." ■

—Don Kazak