

East Palo Alto to staff 'division of aging'

Trouble-plagued senior center could be taken over

by Don Kazak

East Palo Alto officials are grappling over how to better provide and improve senior services, and are prepared to increase funding for such programs.

No final decision will happen for a month or more, but City Council members met with members of the senior community Tuesday night in a first step of mulling over possibilities.

A nonprofit group, the East Palo Alto Senior Center, Inc., has been operating modest programs

for years in a city facility at Bell Street Park. But the program, which doesn't have an executive director, has had difficulties in recent years. San Mateo County got involved in early 2000 to run the program after the organization had difficulty meeting federal and state reporting requirements.

In the meantime, the city has budgeted money to create a Division of Aging, although no manager or staff have been hired yet.

The city may increase funding for the existing senior center by paying for additional staff there, it could provide funds to hire an executive director, or it could decide to run programs itself, with the head of the new Division of Aging running the senior center.

"The city will increase senior services and make sure those services are provided," said Mayor Duane Bay. He said the City Council will probably hold another meeting with members of the senior community before making any decisions.

"The senior population is definitely underserved," said Councilwoman Sharifa Wilson.

Many East Palo Alto seniors go to programs and seek services at the Menlo Park Senior Center in nearby Belle Haven (run by the city of Menlo Park), a few attend programs at the private nonprofit Little House in Menlo Park, and some use the services of the Senior Day Health (continued on page 5)

9/27/02

Palo Alto Weekly

Senior services

(continued from page 3)

Program in Palo Alto, officials in those cities said.

The programs now available at the East Palo Alto Senior Center are relatively modest, including a nutrition program, Tai Chi classes, and a reading group. There is a separate food program provided by the Second Harvest Food Bank.

The senior center programs served some 208 people in East Palo Alto last year, while the food program served some 220 people.

By contrast, the Avenidas senior center in Palo Alto serves some 5,000 people a year, and that doesn't count the separate La Comida food program, which serves 100-150 meals a day at the senior center and 45 meals every Wednesday at Cubberley Community Center.

Little House in Menlo Park serves about 600 people a week, while the Menlo Park Senior Center serves 50

lunches a day and serves about 3,000 people a year.

"We do get a good portion from East Palo Alto," Bob Roessler, community services manager for Menlo Park, said of the Menlo Park Senior Center.

And "a few" people from East Palo Alto attend programs at Little House, said Janice Pierce, director of Little House.

One of the things East Palo Alto officials will address when services are expanded is doing outreach to the Latino and Pacific Islander communities. Now, the great majority of people attending programs at the East Palo Alto Senior Center are African American, while East Palo Alto itself is Latino majority city.

"One of our greatest advantages as a community is our multiculturalism," Wilson said. "We have to maximize the opportunities for everyone." ■

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