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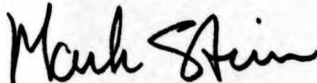
Mayor Barbara A. Mouton
City of East Palo Alto
2415 University Ave.
East Palo Alto, Calif. 94303

Dear Mayor Mouton,

Here, as you requested, is a copy of The Times' article on East Palo Alto's incorporation and its potential implications for other minority communities.

Let me thank you again for your time and help in the preparation of this article.

Sincerely,



Mark A. Stein
Times Staff Writer

East Palo Alto

Minority Cityhood: A Casebook

By MARK A. STEIN,
Times Staff Writer

EAST PALO ALTO, Calif.—Picked-over, poverty-pocketed, crime-troubled East Palo Alto—a run-down anomaly in one of the nation's wealthiest counties—may not impress the casual visitor.

But what's happening in this predominantly black city of 18,950—once known to many residents as Nairobi, Calif.—has drawn the attention of community activists across the nation. The city, founded in 1983, has become the focus of argument between those who contend that minority communities can best seize control of their future by incorporating as cities, and those who see such actions as perpetuating segregation.

Early fruits of incorporation here are mixed. Median household income has risen faster than the statewide average and city services have improved, but no new industry has been attracted and the city is still burdened with a bad image. The crime rate has been cut 25%, but remains more than 10 times higher than the national average for cities its size.

News Has Spread

East Palo Alto has not been transformed from ghetto to glitter, but residents say they find it easier to get streets paved and to deal with police. City officials say they have blocked construction of county public-works projects that were rejected elsewhere.

Even as the experiment has evolved, news of East Palo Alto's declaration of independence spread across the country, often by graduates of nearby Stanford University. For many people, the city represented a fresh approach in efforts to cut minorities a more equitable slice of the nation's economic pie.

"I've already gotten calls from [political activists in] Harlem and Chicago," said Melvin Hendrix, a University of Rhode Island professor who is writing a how-to manual on incorporating a minority community, based in part on the experience here. "It's going to be a major issue [in black politics] for the rest of this century."

Indeed, Andrew P. Jones, co-founder of a recent unsuccessful drive to form a new city out of Boston's Roxbury ghetto, said he also has been contacted by community organizers in several cities who are interested in what cityhood might mean for their communities.

Not Yet a Trend

It is still too early to suggest that there is a trend here. While many academics and activists are aware of East Palo Alto and its aspirations, only a few have decided to study the phenomenon and only Boston activists have tried to implement it—and they lost decidedly.

But people who have looked at the idea of minority community incorporation—even people who oppose it as simplistic, unfeasible or racist—believe that the idea will be tried elsewhere.

"It might not look like much now because we are only seeing the first

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CITYHOOD

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few flakes of snow," Jones said. "But the seasons are definitely changing.

"... The reason it's such a big deal," he added, "is that black people are beginning to realize the value of land control."

It is particularly important because many minority communities are in inner-city areas that already are being gentrified by white-collar workers or redeveloped into high-rent high-rises to slake the thirst for office space, Hendrix and Jones said.

But the same concerns influencing activists in Boston and Brooklyn are also at work in such suburban ghettos as East Palo Alto and Marin City, Calif.

"The land we were pushed onto had no value when we were put there, but it does now," Jones said,



ANNE DOWIE

Mayor Barbara A. Mouton

'East Palo Alto is really the finest of Americana—people petitioning for a redress of grievances, using the democratic process and going on to do what needs to be done.'

and activists are interested in either preventing the displacement of longtime residents or using redevelopment profits to benefit the poor and chronically unemployed.

Although proponents insist that the issue is one of power, not prejudice, their critics see racial disharmony among the potential problems created by efforts to incorporate minority communities independent of nearby larger cities.

"In the past," said the Rev. Charles Stith, a Boston minister who runs a group called Organization for New Equality, "anytime we moved to isolate any community by race or class, they have remained isolated."

Merely incorporating as separate cities, he added, expressing the thoughts of other cityhood critics, will not solve complex social problems that took more than three centuries to develop.

"It's an over-simplistic response to a very complex concern," Stith said. "The question is, 'How do minority communities become full participants in society—politically, economically and in every sense?' Incorporation really does not deal significantly with any of those issues."

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Stith also argued that the appearance of separatism could void past efforts toward full integration. "The chances of this society turning the corner on integration is great," he said. "Now is not the time to turn away."

East Palo Alto teacher Gertrude Wilks, an outspoken incorporation opponent, used the integrationist dreams of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. to dismiss the idea. "I do not want to be part of separatism," she said. "That is what Dr. King brought us out of, and I won't go back for anyone."

Advocates, however, contend that suburban white communities have long sought to get out of—or avoid annexation by—cities with poor and minority residents. Those communities chose independence to protect their economic interests, they say, and it is an example that minority communities should follow.

"When city councils and financial communities are insensitive to the needs of the powerless," said Hendrix, director of the University of Rhode Island's African and Afro-American studies department, "the only way for them to protect themselves is to gain control of the land—to incorporate."

Advocates also say the cityhood option is unlike former black nationalist proposals because, rather than divorcing blacks from the

D: Blacks See Mixed Results in East Palo Alto

majority's system, incorporation is a way to let them use the system as effectively, and on the same terms as, the white majority.

"East Palo Alto is really the finest of Americana—people petitioning for a redress of grievances, using the democratic process and going on to do what needs to be done," said Barbara A. Mouton, the city's engaging and energetic mayor.

In any case, proponents say, a community need not consist only of ethnic or racial minorities to consider cityhood. Other groups—gays, the elderly and even renters—also can incorporate to guard their interests. Advocates point to the 1984 incorporation of West Hollywood—backed largely by a coalition of renters and gays—as an example of this.

However, Jones said, "for the

black community, East Palo Alto really got the ball rolling." Nesbit Crutchfield, a special-districts manager interested in incorporating Marin City, an area with 2,000 people north of San Francisco, said, "What East Palo Alto did and is doing is inspirational."

East Palo Alto, which is actually just north of the City of Palo Alto, about 35 miles south of San Francisco, was once 12.5 square miles of unincorporated, working-class neighborhoods in San Mateo County.

As the city's ethnic mix changed after World War II—it is now 64.8% black and 13.5% Latino—residents detected a decline in the quality of such services as road and sewer repairs and building code enforcement.

Nearby towns, meanwhile, were busy annexing the unincorporated

community's commercial and recreational land, whittling it to 2.5 square miles. East Palo Alto had lost its best assets, such as factory sites, a marina, a golf course and Palo Alto Airport. It was left with the traffic, noise and pollution.

"Palo Alto raped us and Menlo Park raped us and San Mateo County—all of them raped us," Mouton asserted. "To be frank, if we had been a white community, they [county supervisors] would not have allowed them to do that."

After several attempts, a ballot measure creating the City of East Palo Alto was approved in April, 1983—by only 15 votes. Opponents of incorporation, both local citizens and absentee landlords, have battled the city ever since, alleging vote fraud all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

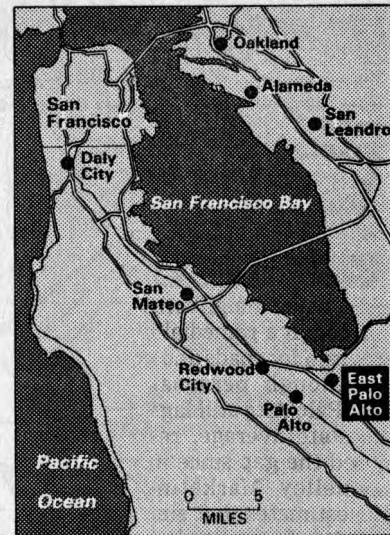
Frustrated city officials blame

the costly legal fight and initial staffing problems for the city's lack of progress in attracting jobs or bolstering city services.

But city officials say that while incorporation has not yet bailed out East Palo Alto, the city has at least stopped taking on more water—and avoided the pitfall most often predicted by cityhood opponents: municipal budget deficits.

"I knew coming in that we could not do everything in the first 100 days," Mayor Mouton said. "We're not Beverly Hills, and we're not

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CITYHOOD: Opponents Warn of Segregation

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Hillsborough. But we're able to provide a good level of service—much better than before.”

The city is, for example, aggressively enforcing building codes to clean up the slum-like appearance of its worst neighborhoods. It also has begun a remedial maintenance program for roads and sewers.

Although personal income in East Palo Alto still lags 20% behind the state average, residents have closed the gap since incorporation. Donnelley Marketing Research Inc. estimates that since 1980, median family income has risen faster in East Palo Alto than overall in the state—up 45.2% compared to 39.3%.

State Employment Development

Department figures show that the unemployment rate also has dropped since incorporation, from an estimated 11.3% in 1983 to roughly 7.1% last November, although this parallels changes seen in the rest of the county and the state.

The unemployment decline came without the city attracting a major new private employer to town, even though that was a major goal of incorporators. The city recently fired its city manager, in part for being unable to attract new jobs.

But residents such as Faye McNair Knox, a Stanford administrator and 21-year East Palo Alto resident, said better citizen participation has eased civic frustration while improving such basic servic-

es as trash collection and crime prevention.

“You hear a lot of mouthing about how we are not doing this or we are not doing that,” City Atty. Robert W. Johnson said, “but if you’d ask those people if they’d want to go back to the old system, I think probably four out of five would say no. They may have a lot of complaints about what’s going on, but it is better.”

Indeed, the leading opponent of incorporation, Menlo Park real estate agent Arn Cenedella, said the city has fared better than he expected. But he remains skeptical of city finances. “I don’t think the whatchamacallit has hit the fan yet,” he said, “but it will in the next year or two.”

Wilks, the East Palo Alto teacher who also opposes cityhood, is even less optimistic. She also worries about the city’s weak tax base but is even more concerned by East Palo Alto’s notorious crime rate. She said that when her son, a Harvard-trained educator, died of heart failure last August, some mourners could not attend his memorial service because a drug-related gun battle had them pinned inside their homes.

Indeed, figures show that East Palo Alto has a violent-crime rate more than 12 times the national average for cities its size, and with 10 homicides in 1986, its murder rate is nearly as high as that of the nation’s deadliest city, Detroit.

Even at that, however, the crime

rate is 24.6% below what it was before the city formed its own Police Department in July, 1985. The sharpest drop, of 28%, came in the number of burglaries, which still are 13 times more common in East Palo Alto than in other small cities in the nation.

Such chilling statistics are the primary part of the city’s bad reputation, which is its biggest impediment to new investment in the city. One of its greatest challenges, the mayor acknowledges, is shedding that reputation.

An example of the importance of a city’s reputation is as close as Oakland, across the bay. Oakland, with 350,000 residents, also has a black majority, a black-run government, a bad image—and trouble wooing new business investors. And Oakland has many assets that East Palo Alto lacks, such as a good port, a newly redeveloped down-

town and cultural groups.

Mouton, however, counters that East Palo Alto is surrounded by two affluent cities, Palo Alto and Menlo Park, sits in the nation’s 19th-wealthiest county, has an undeveloped waterfront naturally suited to recreation and many of the few open, industrially zoned parcels left in the Silicon Valley.

Beverly Scott, a resident since 1967, assistant dean of graduate studies at Stanford University and wife of Councilman Warnell Coats, said she is unhappy that the city has not yet accomplished more. But she believes it has potential and only needs time to learn how to tap it.

“Everybody agreed that we would get to Point A,” she said, referring to incorporation, “but not what we’d do after we got to Point A. So East Palo Alto is moving

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CITYHOOD: Minorities Debate East Palo Alto Incorporation

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through that right now. But everyone knew the city was going to be a model of black self-determination and that as a model it was going to be difficult sometimes."

Still, there are reasons to think that despite East Palo Alto's popularity, its example may not work elsewhere. East Palo Alto was born

of unincorporated land, while other areas being discussed already are part of a city. It usually is legally more difficult to split a city than create an entirely new one.

In Boston last fall, for example, politicians, developers, the news media and other members of the political establishment attacked what was at one time referred to as

the Balkanization of the city. Voters there rejected by a 2-1 margin an advisory referendum on turning part of Boston into a new city called Mandela, after South African civil rights leader Nelson Mandela.

Despite that defeat, both advocates and critics of incorporation expect the issue to be raised again in other cities soon. Even Boston

activists promise a second effort.

"It [East Palo Alto] has raised the consciousness of people that there are other possibilities, other ways to solve their problems," said Hendrix, the professor. "Even if Boston doesn't do it next time, as a historian I would have to say they only missed a chance to be among the first."

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