

East Palo Alto gets big gift

PHILANTHROPY

Foundation's plan could revitalize city's neighborhoods

by Jennifer Kavanaugh

The Menlo Park-based William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has teamed up with local organizations in a major effort to revitalize several East Palo Alto neighborhoods and help foster the city's continuing economic development.

The Hewlett Foundation has given three organizations \$460,000—and the next six months—to help East Palo Alto residents develop a community plan for improving their socioeconomic outlook. If Hewlett officials approve the plan, the foundation will award \$4.5 million over a six-year period to implement the proposal for four central city neighborhoods: Midtown, University Village, The Gardens and Palo Alto Park.

Community leaders and organizers say the foundation's idea—named the Neighborhood Improvement Initiative—may work where previous efforts have failed, because residents will be involved in the planning and the foundation is willing to back their ideas with financial support.

"I'm encouraged by the fact that the Hewlett Foundation has committed to a year-long planning process and is committed to raising the resources to implement the plan," said East Palo Alto Mayor Sharifa Wilson, who has seen other community improvement initiatives come and go. "We've never had the money to fund the plans. The intentions were always good, the plans were good, but we didn't have the money."

The three organizations selected to spearhead the effort—the Community Development Institute in East Palo Alto, the San Mateo-based Peninsula Community Foundation, and Stanford University's Haas Center for Public Service—kicked off the planning pro-

cess this week with a meeting Tuesday night at Cesar Chavez Academy, the first of 25 such meetings open to residents and people who work in the neighborhoods.

Mario Paz, senior program officer for the Peninsula Community Foundation, will be setting up an office at 321 Bell St. in East Palo Alto. Paz's organization, along with the others, will help residents refine their ideas and plans so they can be reasonably put in place and funded. Residents can choose from any number of goals they want to pursue, he said.

"It could be social, it could be economic, it could be issues around public safety, it could be cultural and recreational activities, it can include education, it can be anything that improves the physical infrastructure of the neighborhoods, it could be job development," Paz said. "It's really looking at the big-picture issues."

Paz said the initiative will give people a sense of ownership over their own destiny, particularly those resi-

dents who feel that they're being neglected or pushed out of development projects designed to boost the city's economy.

"So much is happening in East Palo Alto right now," Paz said. "There are fears of gentrification, or residents feeling like they're disassociated from the process. This will provide them with a strong voice in participating in their own development. This gives them not only a voice, but financial leverage in controlling the market forces bearing down on their community."

East Palo Alto is the third city asked to participate in a Hewlett-sponsored, community investment program. The model proposed for East Palo Alto follows multiyear programs already in progress in West Oakland and in the Mayfair district of San Jose, where residents have focused on public safety, affordable housing and economic development, said Alvertha Penny, the Hewlett Foundation's program officer for family and community development.

Unlike other foundations that come into communities, offer money and tell them how to spend it, Penny said, the foundation looks to the residents to decide what they need.

"We don't go in with criteria of what works and what doesn't work," Penny said. "While obviously, we can rely on a number of best practices, what we've tried to do is get people thinking about the community in the long term."

Penny said the foundation chose East Palo Alto because of its history of working with the city and its confidence that it could produce tangible results in those neighborhoods. Wilson, who indicated the city is willing to assist the process, said the foundation has picked a good time to come to East Palo Alto. ■