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***“Political Independence and the Struggle to adopt and protect the first
Rent Stabilization and Just Cause for Eviction Ordinance
in the City of East Palo Alto”***

by
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On April 10th 1984 the voters supported the first law

I want to share with you some Notes and Personal Recollections on how the Community of East Palo Alto in the 1980's stood up to powerful political, bureaucratic, and economic forces and laid the legal, administrative, and ethical foundations to protect low income and moderate income families in the rental housing market, while allowing landlord property owners to make a fair return on their investments.

I believe that without a fair but strong legal and political framework to regulate the economic relations between landlords and tenants, a few powerful and abusive landlords can inflict much suffering on people, especially when greed and intimidation rule over fairness and compassion. Our community has struggled and won many victories in the last thirty years but has also suffered injustices in trying to protect affordable, decent, safe, and fair rental housing.

Some NOTES and Personal Recollections of events leading up to the April 10th, 1984 election when voters in East Palo Alto supported a Rent Stabilization and Just Cause for Eviction Law by a margin of 58.8%, thereby also solidifying the political existence of the City, which had incorporated in 1983 by a mere 15 votes

The Year 1981

As a resident and tenant on the west side of East Palo Alto, and at the time a member of the East Palo Alto Citizens Committee for Incorporation (EPACCI), I began to do organizing work along with a few other fellow residents. We also formed a group called West of Bayshore Renters and Homeowners Association (WEBRHA). Throughout this year and the next I became acutely aware of many problems faced by tenants, and of some of the abuses perpetrated by some managers and landlords. We tried to help each other deal with issues such as: exorbitant and frequent rent increases, arbitrary and retaliatory evictions, lack of response to health and safety concerns. We also found out the limits of ‘legal’ protections by the County, State and National government, for that matter. The legal system seemed to favor landlords much more.

1982

On April 13th, 1982 we had an election to become our own city and lost by 41 votes. As members of EPPACI and WEBRHA we rededicated ourselves to seek another election and campaign hard to win political independence for our community. By this time some of us had also concluded that in order to help ourselves as tenants we needed to form an organization to advocate for tenants' rights and for legal and political protection, at the same time that we sought to incorporate for the overall improvement of the community. A few absentee landlords were speculating on the rental housing market, raising rents, evicting people...putting greed above fair business practices. So we called a meeting and formed the East Palo Alto Council of Tenants (EPACT), in the apartment where I lived at the time. We did this in part as a defiance to some landlords and managers who tried to restrict our organizing and political work in apartment buildings

1983

By the time of the June 7th, 1983 Incorporation election, the work of EPACT had succeeded in placing the issue of tenants' rights squarely in front of candidates for city council and the pro and anti incorporation proponents. When the votes were tallied, **our city was incorporated by a margin of 15 votes!**

The absentee landlords had formed an alliance with the local anti-incorporation forces and almost defeated our struggle, by pouring big money and filing lawsuits trying to prevent the election from even taking place

On July 1st, we had the swearing in ceremony and then held the first official meeting of our newly formed East Palo Alto City Government. We were now officially the 20th city in San Mateo County. I had the honor of being elected as a councilmember, and in preparation for that first meeting, and fulfilling a pledge to tenant families, I had requested the preparation of an emergency ordinance to temporarily freeze rents. As reported by the Peninsula Times Tribune on July 2nd, *"...During the meeting, the Council passed 26 emergency ordinances and resolutions, nearly all of them routine. One exception was an ordinance freezing rents for 90 days in all apartment buildings with four or more units. The vote was 4 – 1..."*

While the emergency ordinance was in effect, the City Council appointed a Task Force to deliberate and advise the Council on the contents of a Rent Stabilization and Just Cause for Eviction Law that the Council could consider.

In November the Council debated and adopted an ordinance that was to take effect in December. However, the political arm of the absentee landlords challenged the action of the City Council through the process of a Referendum. They hired 'local' people and spent over \$20,000 to collect signatures. The stage was set for an election to be held on April 10th, 1984

1984

Throughout 1983 several lawsuits had been filed and paid for by the treasury of the speculator absentee landlord group, challenging the Incorporation election and the emergency rent law. The political existence of the city and our hard won independence was by no means assured. It now appeared in the spring of 1984 that statewide landlord political and economic interests were converging on our little city with the intent of crushing not only an adopted rent law---as they had been doing throughout the state—but city government itself. I have records that show

expenditures, reported to the state of California, of over \$90,000 spent by the ‘Property Rights Committee’ to defeat the rent law and weaken the political majority on the City Council.

The landlords underestimated the level of organization and dedication by the all-volunteer tenant activists and their allies. And most of all, they did not count on the determined response of tenant voters themselves, some of whom had overcome intimidation, and even some of their own apathy. They were the ones who delivered an overwhelming victory for tenants’ rights and a political reaffirmation of the existence of the City of East Palo Alto.

The work of the coalition of tenants and progressive homeowners and most of the pro-incorporation forces resulted in a 58.8% election victory. The east side of the city supported the Rent Stabilization Ordinance by 35 votes, and the mostly tenant west side part of East Palo Alto won by a margin of 328 votes!

The people of the East Palo Alto community had codified into a legal framework their aspirations and ideas about how the economic and political relationship between landlords and tenants was to be carried out in the future. Living in a new city strategically located in the fairly wealthy peninsula area, we as officials and residents became more concerned about the gentrification and displacement forces that could affect our residents.

The ordinance approved by the voters in 1984 contained five major parts that would serve as standards for future deliberations, generally:

1. Landlords could raise the rent only once a year, consistent with the Consumer Price Index
2. A Rent Stabilization Board appointed by the City Council would direct the implementation of the Law and adopt Regulations, among other duties
3. Tenants would have protection from arbitrary and unjust-cause evictions.
4. Interest earned on security deposits would be returned to the tenants annually
5. Newly constructed rental units would be exempt as would landlords who own four units or less

1985 and later years

The newly appointed Rent Board was occupied with the implementation of the new law and the City Council was addressing a myriad of critical issues. The opposition continued their efforts to undermine the city government and Rent Stabilization Law and program.

Under the deceptive slogan of “Protecting the Civil Rights of Property Owners”, the absentee landlords and their allies placed a ballot measure aimed at striking down the voter approved Rent Law of 1984. We came together again and were able to defeat that 1985 ballot measure. That and other subsequent stories are left for later and another day...