

## Don West



### Power through zoning

**H**IDDEN BENEATH all the words over the East Palo Alto incorporation fight is a basic fact of political life: The person who controls zoning controls millions of dollars in potential real estate profits.

East Palo Alto contains 2.5 square miles or 1,600 acres of property in the path of industrial development. With industrially zoned land in the community valued as high as \$323,000 an acre, the profit potential is staggering.

Not all of this land is open and undeveloped. While some of the community can be described only as a black ghetto, it contains houses for 14,000 people, about 53 percent of whom own their own carefully maintained, meticulously kept homes.

Speculators own many of the others and they would like to benefit from any shift in character of the community. A lot of these bring in enough money to pay taxes and interest, but are substandard and worth less than the land beneath them.

**S**OME SPECULATORS want to see their property zoned for high-density housing developments, which the severe housing needs of nearby Silicon Valley industries have made very lucrative.

Others bet on getting their land converted into a future commercial development or consolidated into the edge of an industrial park.

Vying for the job of making zoning and development decisions are the leaders of the incorporation fight, most of whom are black like their neighbors, and others, mostly white, trying to keep the county in control by recommending politically impossible ideas like annexation of the area to Menlo Park.

The county bureaucracy has a head start, because county planners have developed a proposed master plan for the community.

There are three large parcels that are of the greatest concern, because whatever zoning is adopted for them will set the pattern for neighboring properties. Predictably, there has been considerable speculative buying around and in those areas.

One is the 27-acre former Ravenswood High School site just east of the University Avenue-Bayshore interchange, which Sequoia Union High School officials would like zoned for industrial office use.

The county planners have recommended splitting the property at O'Connor Street, leaving the northern part in institutional zoning for park purposes, while the southern portion could be developed with up to 17 residential units per acre.

**A**NOTHER SITE is the Nairobi Shopping Center, which has fallen in disrepair. Planners would place that acreage in medium high density residential zoning as well, but suggest that this should be used for neighborhood commercial development until the community grows large enough for a larger shopping center.

The Ravenswood Industrial Park in the northeastern part of the community is one of the hottest targets for speculators, because of the availability of relatively large parcels of land near industries like the Zoecon Chemical Co. and Boorman Steel Co.

Vast acreages devoted to auto wrecking yards would be converted to other general industrial uses under the county plans.

The big problem for planners has been to create a buffer between the industrial park and the nearby residential section, where many homes are valued in excess of \$100,000.

A snafu by county planners allowed a recycling center to have access to its rather noisy business from a residential street. Litigation and lengthy hearings are still under way to sort out that problem. The long-range county plan would place offices in this area on the southern edge of the industrial park.

Some 46 acres in East Palo Alto, which are held in a special agricultural zone, would be placed in medium-high-density residential zoning, but be allowed to continue their farming activities for as long as the owners wish. Most such operations involve greenhouse crops.

The power to make the final decisions on the future shape of East Palo Alto obviously will involve considerable potential profit. In these days when local officials have few real powers left, it is no wonder that this fight has been an emotional one.