



Times Tribune staff photo by Todd Rosenl

An angry resident addresses the East Palo Alto Rent Stabilization Board Wednesday night.

Rent control debate boils in East Palo Alto

By Michael Shapiro
Times Tribune staff

In an emotion-charged meeting Wednesday night, two members of the East Palo Alto Rent Stabilization Board, who were asked Tuesday to resign, argued with residents over a key provision of the city's rent control law.

Although board Chairman Robert Saunders and board member Anthony Horwath were given one week to resign Tuesday by the City Council, they participated in the meeting.

Both said they are seeking legal advice and have not decided whether to resign.

On Wednesday's agenda was a proposal calling for elimination of the city's hearing officers. A decision was postponed after heated

discussions.

These officers conduct the first stage of a two-tier process designed to allow tenants or landowners to contest rents or other provisions of the rent stabilization ordinance.

Horwath said eliminating hearing officers would simplify the process by having grievances made directly to the board.

One-third to two-thirds of cases are appealed (to the rent board), he said. "If we're going to hear them anyway, we should be the body of first resort. We're making the process simpler — that's all."

About 25 people attended Wednesday's volatile meeting, and several addressed the board, in-

Please see RENT, A-4



Robert Saunders
... faces ouster.



Anthony Horwath
... wants streamlined system.

RENT

Continued from A-3

cluding Susan Davidson, a hearing officer for the city.

If the ordinance passes, it would be necessary to resort to Superior Court to appeal a board decision, which costs too much for most East Palo Alto residents, she said.

"We need an appeal body that's free, that's fast, where you need no counsel," Davidson said. In the current two-tier system hearing officers are the first stage and the rent board hears appeals.

Claudia Grill of East Palo Alto said, "You are null and voiding any way to get objective review."

She said that if she is not satisfied with the board's ruling, she has no other resort than Superior Court.

"You know pretty well most people can't afford that," she said.

Board member Louise Jones said it would be "preposterous" to expect the board to hear every complaint.

"I don't think we could handle it," she said, figuring that there are approximately 100 complaints per year and each requires an average

of six hours of consideration. "I don't have 600 hours to give."

Jones said it is "a lot fairer" to allow an unbiased hearing officer to be the first resort, rather than the landowners and tenants who sit on the board.

Several local residents were angered that the proposal was considered without a publicized public hearing to give citizens a chance to comment to the board.

Others said that any decision made Wednesday would be declared null and void if Horwath and Saunders are ousted.

The council based its unanimous decision to ask for the resignations of Horwath and Saunders on a report from City Attorney Reginald Crowell that said a pending lawsuit filed by Horwath, Saunders and other landowners against the city's rent control ordinance renders them ineligible to serve on the rent board.

After a heated exchange during the rent board meeting, Horwath appeared to challenge former board chairman Carlos Romero to a fight.

"I'm tired of your crap, Romero. You want to go. Let's go," he said.

"Go where?" Romero responded. "Are you challenging me to a fight?"