

# satterwhite

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

incorporation, absentee landlords, east palo alto, protest, vote, rent, mccloskey, community, control, opposition, landlord, menlo park, ruben, natural, played, election, politics, country, movement, black lives movement

## SPEAKERS

Omowale Satterwhite, David Skidmore

### David Skidmore 00:06

Very good. So thanks for agreeing to speak with me. You know, I'm writing up this piece. I don't have any plan yet on what to do with it other than share it with friends and folks that might be interested. But you know, the focus is on the relationship between rent control and incorporation. And I thought you would, I'm sure you would have a lot to offer on that. So well, I

### Omowale Satterwhite 00:37

I have some. You know, the primary, I think, resource around that would be Ruben. Maybe Carlos. But definitely Ruben. And William, probably. And I started you talking to them. But yeah, I have some thoughts. I can show you how, since I was, in today's language, the campaign manager or lead organizer for the incorporation movement, I can tell you how I fit in, and I wasn't a runner. So I can tell you how it got blended into the overall effort around incorporation and became a priority. Yeah, I can, I can talk about that. That'd be great. That the story is pretty straightforward. So why don't we get to your questions? And you can ask them as you wrote them, or you can do it any way you wish.

### David Skidmore 01:30

Well, yeah, I guess I the only question I added was a initial one, just when did issues such as rent control, just cause eviction first come on your radar screen.

### Omowale Satterwhite 01:41

And the incorporation movement. Yeah, I wasn't a renter.

### David Skidmore 01:48

And, and so as us, you know, thought about the relationship between incorporation rent control and, and the politics of it. It's particularly what I'm interested in, you know, how did you see it?

### Omowale Satterwhite 02:01

You know, I'm looking back. I don't know if I had a proactive strategic analysis at that point. But the main opposition to incorporation and its practice of financier's was the absentee landlords and so that, that that group became a natural enemy to incorporation and even though I wasn't a runner, then seeing a natural ally as Ritter's. You know, for me, and the role that I was playing became it that was just a reasonable and it resulted in part from, you know, how the politics of incorporation happen. And then once we did the outreach to the west side, and rent control, became the primary interest of people on the west side. I mean, safety, public safety, I think, was everybody's first issue. Maybe I don't want to overstate the case. But right up there, near the top of the list, maybe at the top for the group of activists who were involved in Corporation was rent control. And so the fact that our primary opposition was absentee landlords and I allies were very interested and strongly concerned about rent control. And in terms of the African American community, this was that the Black Power Air and so the notion of giving voice legitimacy to community and enacting policy that benefited community and that the corporate sector was a natural enter, was it for me was a natural, a, I was able to lay a come to that conclusion easily as a black activist who was engaged with the black power movement, and someone who was working on incorporation, and the principal enemy was absentee landlords. And the our way to get to the West side, I mean, my organizing strategy has always been find somebody that's affiliated with an identity group, and let them be your connector. And so what we needed to organize in the west side, we got we made there were connectors, in this case, Ruben, eventually Carlos. And those connections primary issue was rent control. So all of those three things for me came together in that way around the connection between rent control, and so the reason that it had it was high priority. So when we set the first agenda, we probably couldn't take an action on creating our own police force then, but one of the big issues was creating our own police force at that took a while almost a year, but that was a high priority issue. But then, but Berkeley and then Southern California city, I forgot what it was. Those were the first two,

**David Skidmore** 05:12

Santa Monica, maybe

**Omowale Satterwhite** 05:13

Santa Monica. And then we we took Berkeley's rent control ordinance and passed it essentially verbatim. And became the third city in the state with rent control.

**David Skidmore** 05:26

Yeah. So that Westside part, you know, it's interesting to me because that was the center of gravity for the East Palo Alto Council of tenants. Right was involved in that's where we did a lot of voter registration and leafleting. We did a lot of good workshops and meetings in homes and things like that. But I also remember laugh code. So even you know, when you had those two votes on a corporation, and the first vote, part of the west side was not included. And then the second vote, they did include all of the

**Omowale Satterwhite** 06:07

No, it was different. No, no, absolutely not. So the first vote, all of these Palo Alto was included, but the East the Menlo Park sanitation district, also served Menlo Park residents in some Menlo Park residents, by virtue of being in that district got to vote on our incorporation because the last code ruling was that

we had to dissolve five districts and incorporate the city in the vote. So there were five measures on the dissolve for districts and then vote for the incorporation. All five measures passed in East Palo Alto. It was the vote to dissolve the Menlo Park sanitation district and the voters in Menlo Park that defeated incorporation in the first the second vote, there was only one thing on the ballot, and that was, do you want to incorporate Yes or no?

**David Skidmore** 06:59

Right. But LAFCO did get pressure from the landlord's wanted to be left out. They wanted to Westside left out. So they could because they were arguing to integrate with Menlo Park. They want to you know, Menlo Park to annex, right.

**Omowale Satterwhite** 07:19

Why not? LAFCO has a body at least to add LAFCO staff. I strongly oppose the incorporation and the majority of the Lascaux body I'm opposed to. So let me just tell you how it all happen. And this is not directly related direct control. So the Lascaux staff strongly opposed incorporation, they hired a consultant that did the technical study that's required, and their consultant concluded that incorporation was not feasible for for the unincorporated area of East Palo Alto. We hired our own consultant, who was on the staff of the Stanford Research Institute, right there in middle part, and our consultant concluded strongly that incorporation was feasible. And because of the stature of the Stanford Research Institute, Visa be the stature of the consultant that they hired. The last co itself had to favor or approve our first request around the before the first vote. They're the instincts of the last call majority was to oppose the incorporation vote. But because of the Stanford Research international study, they really couldn't oppose the vote. But they created five measures, one of which included voting by Menlo Park residents on our incorporation. So they saw a couple things happen after that first vote fail, we got lucky kcps this was before you know, social media, but kcbs for several months, ran daily, a an editorial about how unfair it was for East Palo Alto to not be incorporated, because Menlo Park residents had voted it down. And they've kept hammering and hammering and hammering that there should be a second vote, and that Menlo Park residents should be allowed to vote. Of course, we were doing our own politics. And there were friends of East Palo Alto, who are also doing politicking. But the combination of that that came together and the laugh kosun approved the second vote with with with the only the one measure without the requirement that the of the four districts be dissolved. And so yeah, that's how all that politics played out. And that's not directly related to the rent control. I mean, the rent control piece I've already talked about, but that's how those two elections played out.

**David Skidmore** 09:55

So did you have any concerns voiced to you by other folks on whether supporting rent control might alienate some of the homeowners in the community.

**Omowale Satterwhite** 10:12

Now, that was the main arc, there were two groups that oppose incorporation. The homeowners association, and their primary argument was that if we incorporate, you will lose your home. Yes. And the other group, major group that oppose it was the absentee landlords.

**David Skidmore** 10:48

Yeah. So the Did you anticipate that the opposition from the landlords would remain would be quite so extensive? I mean, I, I have a lot of evidence on how they went to a three County area and basically every landlord in that, in that area that that Tri County area, if money to fund to fight against

**Omowale Satterwhite** 11:19

No, I was, that was my first real big organizing effort. I didn't. So looking back, I can understand it. But in the moment, I wasn't aware and conscious and strategic, you know about how to deal with this. We just did grassroots organizing, and we want. But once again, we knew that that was a formidable, I mean, in the course of the work, we knew that they were a formidable force that they had lots of resources. And so let me just give you a couple other examples. Um, so people cost he became the attorney for the opposition. And so Pete McCloskey, because he had just come out of the Congress, he was still connected to all the governmental agencies. Those of us who were in the leadership of the incorporation movement, we got investigated by the FBI. The reason that I know and I phones got tapped, the reason that I know this, is that I had been a deputy superintendent in the Ravenswood City School District, and an employee who was there who was after I left, the school district, who was a senior staff member in the school district, called me and said that he had been visited by the FBI who was doing an investigation about my role in the incorporation. So I got firsthand from a person who got visited by the - I didn't even know what was going on. And then when it went to trial court, Pete McCloskey tried to introduce all that evidence, and the trial judge wouldn't hear it.

**David Skidmore** 13:02

McCloskey,

**Omowale Satterwhite** 13:02

We were aware in the moment or as the moment evolved, we were aware that the politics of this the Lascaux staff and majority of the board opposed us at the county, people klasky was bringing to bear all of his connections and resources to oppose the incorporation the absentee landlords and their wealth and their networks. I didn't know what they were specifically where the money was coming from, but their networks were opposing the incorporation. And so yeah, we were aware in the moment that all of this opposition existed. Yes.

**David Skidmore** 13:38

So, and I want to get back to that point, but just some more specific, do you think that the FBI became interested because of McCloskey?

**Omowale Satterwhite** 13:48

That's always been my speculation. Yes.

**David Skidmore** 13:51

So you're, you know, you just summarize it really well, that all these forces against the community and then internally, there was the homeowners association. So those are all the forces?

**Omowale Satterwhite** 14:09

Yes.

**David Skidmore** 14:10

And you know, they use lawsuits, they use recall elections, these initiatives, etc. But what's, what I think is so fascinating about this case, is that you guys beat them down every single time. Every single time. Well,

**Omowale Satterwhite** 14:29

there's a reason we did that. On the front seven. Yeah, so let me get the reason that we're probably three reasons that we did that. Maybe four. When we formed the incorporation committee, we agreed that we would only work on incorporation, even though there were lots of community issues. And so the laser focused concentration of the committee itself just on incorporation was one of the most significant factors. Secondly, that Sri study is what got us through The last call to the Board of Supervisors, because once it got to the Board of Supervisors, they're only tasked with a positive recommendation was to schedule an election. Certainly, we had a superior supreme lawyer, Tom Adams, who was a lot. You know, at the time, the environmentalists have had a lot of power in San Mateo County, the lawyer for the environmental community in San Mateo County, one of them. And one of the cheap ones was a guy by the name of Tom Adams, Tom Adams became our lawyer. So he represents he hobnob with all these people with the county all the time. So he represented us. And so that was the other factor. And then finally, as we got to the, as I said, into the second vote, the popular the popular opinion became that we had been unfairly treated in the election, and kcbs. Again, this is my own speculation. I think they played a really, really big role in getting the second election to happen.

**David Skidmore** 16:01

As the landlord's, you know, even after the election kept on fighting and fighting, was there any talk ever any, you know, consideration given to Hey, maybe we should just repeal this land this rate control law and let them win?

**Omowale Satterwhite** 16:20

Oh, no, not not. I was on the council for the first city council. I was I think I was on the council two years. I'm not aware of any and I had a pretty prominent role on the first city council. That was never an issue that came up Never. Yeah.

**David Skidmore** 16:35

Okay. Wow, this has been really interesting.

**Omowale Satterwhite** 16:40

No, we were. I mean, we're in the midst of the Black Power movement. And so, yeah, we weren't gonna capitulate to some landlords.

**David Skidmore** 16:50

Right? Yeah.

**Omowale Satterwhite** 16:51

I mean, in terms of I mean, at the time you spell out those two thirds black. And so, you know, and, and it's basically a black movement to incorporate these Palo Alto. And so we weren't going to capitulate to some white absentee landlords, not at all No. Yeah.

**David Skidmore** 17:08

Looking back, do you think that rent control been a net net positive for the community, or not?

**Omowale Satterwhite** 17:17

The answer is yes. I think that Vince is you know, the landlord's took the matter to the state legislature. And the state legislature begin at enacting laws that govern the local ordinances. in Berkeley, San Mateo, San Mateo, Santa Monica and East Palo Alto. I mean, the tea I mean, yeah, that it may overstate the case, but set limitations and boundaries around the local rent control ordinances.

**David Skidmore** 17:53

Do you think that the the immediate precipitating factor was the East Palo Alto and the worry that that model might spread to the state?

**Omowale Satterwhite** 18:04

I have no idea, but I doubt it. I think my guess is that the association, that absentee landlords belong to whatever, whatever the apartment associations were, this was a natural issue for them to keep legislative rights around to track and whenever an incorporation raises head with the possibility of British control, they would show up in force, I would think that that would be a natural, but I have I didn't have any connections with them. And so I don't want to speculate in terms of the fact of it. But I would imagine that would be a natural. Yeah, area of focus for for their professional association groups.

**David Skidmore** 18:49

I learned that a year ago, the California adopted statewide rent control. Kind of

**Omowale Satterwhite** 18:59

Yeah, and it would have been all the statewide legislation was less restrictive than local ordinances. Yeah, that had happened that progressive ordinances that had been enacted in local jurisdictions. And so there still is rent control, if you follow him saying, but it doesn't have the same teeth that the local ordinances have.

**David Skidmore** 19:25

So this is moving away. But if you if you have a few more minutes and just can't resist asking you, what do you how do you compare the political climate today to the late 60s, early 70s, when you were getting involved in politics?

**Omowale Satterwhite** 19:47

I've actually answered that question. When I think about the late 60s, I think about mass movement. And so there are lots of big gatherings of marches protests that eventually caught the attention of the national media. And when and when these, this organizing and protests became a daily a daily stories on the national media. That was then what I think was really central to what the changes that occurred

at the natural national level. And so precipitated by the assassination of Nick first Kennedy. And then later, Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy did some work but much, much less, less. So in terms of in terms of the impact, and so this is yes, impressionistic, but there was mass movement. And the target was primarily government. And the it played out less at this, since I wasn't in the south, it played out less for me at the state level, whereas it was playing out that way. In some Southern a lot of southern states, I would see it play out at the at as, as a national movement, I was thinking about it nationally. And so the day I think, is just to reverse, it's kind of like, let 1000 flowers bloom everywhere you go. There's somebody organized and trying to do something in their own little space to get it done in their own way. And the problem today, if there is a problem, I think, problem is not the best word. But the challenge today is how do you connect those voices and those efforts and lift them up so that they have a transit, transcending effect across the country? Now, if you had asked me this question before Black Lives Matter, that's how I would have answered it, if you were so yes. So what's going on today is much more embedded across the country in ways that are having better impact, because it's happening from the local level up. And it's not, it's not the daily story in the national media. But this work is going on everywhere. And it's not just in people of color communities, there are partnerships. There's a multi sector, multi ratio, multiracial partnerships that are making this happen. And you can see, everywhere you go, somebody is organized and doing something. It's just that it wasn't connected across sectors, and at the national level. And then along comes Black Lives Matter. That was the most profound thing that I've seen in my life, regarding the organizing, and what often has happened in the past, is that there's a moment of opportunity. And sometimes the principal organizers are not prepared to translate the opportunity into policy action. And I'm not being critical. I mean, you don't have a crystal ball, you don't know, they didn't know that the whole world was going to protest. And the fact that the protest was occurring in so many places, has to be attributed to the fact that they had actually did a lot of great organizing. So that so you had lots of points of sparking of those protests around the country, which, but then have to happen internationally. But then. So since you don't have the infrastructure and the means to translate your protest, even if it's bad into action, then the other side changes the narrative. And so they say no, defund the police, and they will they elect Republicans.

**David Skidmore** 23:35

Yeah, well, and then you get the different roles between, you know, politicians, and activists.

**Omowale Satterwhite** 23:43

Now, all of that plays out. But the, the the act of the Black Lives movement, period, I was the most profound thing I've seen. Let me make one other point. And so all of that individual, grassroots organizing is still going on. It just got inspired in another way by the Black Lives movement and seeing the mass international protests around those issues around around justice issues.

**David Skidmore** 24:20

Yeah, I think the the multi racial aspect of the protest was, was striking, and, you know, hopeful. So, you know, one of the things that I'm it's been on my mind is that you have, you have a certain degree of activism and protest and social movement going on that's deeply embedded in communities and issues as long term. It's good to persist, no matter who's in President right. But then it seems to me you also have some aspects of what's been going on last few years. That is a reaction to Donald Trump being in office and the things he's doing.

**Omowale Satterwhite** 25:05

I didn't mention that. But of course, that is a significant piece.

**David Skidmore** 25:09

And when so that when Joe Biden becomes president, you know, be interesting to me to see how much of it drops off. Right?

**Omowale Satterwhite** 25:19

What you have is a pair, Donald Trump, in my view is going to try to set up a parallel government. I wouldn't imagine I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't create a cabinet in the various government in the same categories, where you have governmental agencies and challenge policy all over the country, in the way that he's challenging the election now, and he may have the juice to do that. And so yeah, I just, I don't I agree with what you're saying. I just think going forward, you, there will be this is kind of like what happened with incorporation, you had two opposing sides. And in both cases, the first vote and the second vote, it was less than 3030 votes, in terms of whoever the victory is. So the country is divided right down the middle. And it took us 10 years to actually emerge from that level, that kind of division, and we're a local community. And so I just imagined that division is going to be the predominant thing that we see variable factor that we see. And it'll play out in multiple ways. And if the republicans remain control of the Senate? Well, I think that anytime you have leadership that's been in place a long time, and the democrats had the losses that they had in the last election, they love that leadership needs to move on. I mean, it's, and so that's not happening. And so that's a problem, I think of the Democratic Party. Um, but I think that yet it's the duality of the opposition and division within the country is going to be the dominant theme through the rest of this decade. Yeah. Well, you know, and I was about to say, if the republicans get the Senate, this time, there'll be no motion. And if the democrats get the senate Senate, I hope they won't do it. Obama did. So Obama negotiated, negotiated, negotiated. And then, for example, when Obamacare came up for vote, they negotiated a down, watered it down, did not have one republican voted for it. And so I just hope, by if he has a majority in this sentence, takes bold action. But who knows? He might say, well, I want to get along with the other side. And their opposition to so who knows? We'll see. But no, I think the political dynamic in the country for at least the next decade will be the division.

**David Skidmore** 27:55

Will you remember the 80s and 90s were paired when, you know, the difference between the parties weren't that that huge, and, and that puts us seem sort of stuck in a certain centrist group. But now we live in a period where you could imagine going all the way to fascism, you could imagine, you know, historic, progressive change, or anything in between.

**Omowale Satterwhite** 28:21

It's, it's it's a no, but the difference is this. This is the That's true. But there's differences. So when you look on the Republican side, say the conservative side, the moderate conservatives don't dominate the party, the grassroots activists do. On the Democratic side, the grassroots activists don't dominate the party. The moderates do,

**David Skidmore** 28:46

exactly. That's a good way of putting it.

**Omowale Satterwhite** 28:49

And the moderates on the Democratic side, attack the activists on the Democratic side as much as the those on the Republican side. It's so crazy for them. And that's what I see.

**David Skidmore** 29:05

You think activists on the left and right, steal ideas from each other tactics?

**Omowale Satterwhite** 29:11

I think organizing, there are 10,000 ways to organize. But fundamentally, it's messaging and connecting and bringing people out to lift up their voice. I don't know each other. But I think that you would find some parallelism in the tactics. Yes, automatic. And by the way, we're in an era of social media, and I'm an Oji. So I don't really know social media and its applications. And my response to this question is pre social media. Yeah.

**David Skidmore** 29:44

Well, that's really all I have. I'm going to try to get in touch with some other folks like Lon and Ruben.

**Omowale Satterwhite** 29:51

Yeah. Lana, Diane might have you talked to Dan. They were also very active in that work. But yeah, yeah, Rubin was for what as with regards to the Nexus to rent control, he was the main person.

**David Skidmore** 30:11

I don't remember William being actively involved in the incorporation committee. But later on, he became the chief spokesman for that work. Yeah, yeah, he came around after I left. But I saw I met with him for a cup. Out of these Palo Alto a couple years ago, we had a nice talk. He's an interesting character,

**Omowale Satterwhite** 30:33

ya know, he's got lots and lots of information. Yeah, he does. And he's, no, he's no, he's a talker. Anyway, I've got a run anything else?

**David Skidmore** 30:42