

East Palo Alto is ready to become its own city

AFTER NEARLY 50 years of delays, the moment of truth is about to arrive in East Palo Alto. On Tuesday community residents will finally vote on whether East Palo Alto should become a city.

Talk of incorporation dates back to the Jazz Age, when cityhood was urged as a strategy to free East Palo Alto from a proposal to annex San Mateo County to San Francisco County. Incorporation has been sought six times since then, but only this year does the dream have a good chance of becoming reality.

The incorporation drive over the last two years has been a struggle at every turn; in fact, the issue is on the ballot only by virtue of a last-minute about-face by San Mateo County Supervisor John Ward. As a member of the Local Agency Formation Commission, Ward switched sides on a 3-2 vote to recommend that the county supervisors authorize the election. Conflicting projections as to the economic viability of a city of East Palo Alto also have bothered the campaign. Those concerns ensure also that the vote Tuesday will be close.

East Palo Alto is governed by San Mateo County, whose services emanate from Redwood City, five miles away. Its water, sanitation, recreation and fire protection services are provided by various other public agencies. It is a community with economic and social problems, problems that are accentuated by the community's contrast to the affluence and homogeneity of the rest of the Peninsula.

As governors, the San Mateo County supervisors have not turned their backs on East Palo Alto — far from it. But after the decades of their remote control, the community's problems persist. That's not surprising, considering that providers of services are not directly accountable to the community they serve, and that the citizens have little voice in the administration of those services.

If the residents are made responsible for the direction of their own community, we believe a sense of pride and accountability — not to mention governmental efficiency — will get East Palo Alto moving forward again. And as with any democracy, if the community slips backward it will have no one but its own leadership to blame.

It's hard to argue with the notion of self-government. There is no doubt that East Palo Alto has the human resources to make it work (the quality of City Council candidates clearly attests to that), so the key to successful cityhood will be economics. Consultant Angus McDonald figures that East Palo Alto would have a budget surplus of \$550,000 after its first year, tapering off to a \$250,000 surplus by fiscal 1987.

That's not much of a cushion, especially in this time of national economic uncertainty and state-funding cutbacks. But East Palo Alto does have business potential. It no doubt has the least expensive land still available on the Peninsula, it is central to the Peninsula and it provides, with the expanded Dumbarton Bridge, a major link to the East Bay.

That doesn't guarantee a surge in de-

velopment. The new city must meet prospective developers more than half way in recruiting commerce, industry and housing to the city. That will mean recruiting a city staff that knows the needs of business and industry.

Opponents of incorporation contend that the low sewage capacity and deteriorating sewer system will present an immediate and major financial drain before economic development can take hold. That's true, and the new city will no doubt have to call on bonds, special assessment districts or federal aid to hurdle those problems. Property taxes, courtesy of Proposition 13, cannot be raised without voter approval, but the city may find that it will indeed have to ask residents for such approval, or impose users' fees, in order to upgrade city services.

There are no less than 15 candidates vying for the five seats on the proposed City Council. Three of them are obvious choices for office in this crucial stage of cityhood. Frank "Omowale" Satterwhite, a management consultant, is a former member of the advisory Municipal Council and now serves on the county Planning Commission. He is clearly the most experienced candidate, and his leadership skills are obvious. Barbara Mouton has been the director of the community's Senior Center and has served on the Municipal Council since 1976. She is a warm, caring person who showed she can handle herself in the political arena with her perseverance in the incorporation drive. Ruben Abrica is an education researcher and a relative newcomer to community politics. But he demonstrates the sophistication and communication skills the new council will need. He also can help bring into city government the community's growing Hispanic populations.

There are nine other candidates who could serve the new city with distinction, though none of them shows the obvious strengths of Abrica, Satterwhite or Mouton. Voters are offered longtime community involvement and maturity of judgment in Theotis Nelson, a cost accountant; Onyango Bashir, an engineer; and Peter Evans, a medical researcher. They are offered political know-how in current Municipal Council members Bradford Stamper, a personnel recruiter, and Berkley Driessel, an organizational-behavior consultant. They are offered youthful energy and fresh perspectives in Roosevelt Cox, a legal researcher and law student, house painter James Conley and actress Harriet McNair. They are also offered a sincere advocate for the downtrodden in Dorothy Romes, a nurses' assistant.

In addition to the City Council choices and the incorporation proposal, voters should also be aware of three other measures, which would dissolve the water, sanitary and recreation districts serving East Palo Alto. If even one of those measures fails, the entire incorporation effort fails.

But we believe the spirit of independence — the critical element to successful self-government — is too strong to let this effort fail.