

Anti-rent control fights expected to survive East Palo Alto vote

By Paul Engstrom
Staff Writer

Supporters and opponents of rent control may not see eye to eye, but they do agree about one thing:

Tuesday's election in East Palo Alto, in which voters upheld the city's rent control law, will have little or no impact on related initiatives that face ballot tests in Los Gatos, Burlingame and the Sonoma County town of Cotati.

In those three cities as well as in East Palo Alto itself, rent control foes have circulated petitions for an initiative that would prohibit local authorities from setting any limits on the price of property for sale, lease, or

rent. The measures in Los Gatos and Cotati have qualified for the June 5 ballot, while the other two still must be certified for the Nov. 6 election.

All four measures are identical because they share a common sponsor, San Diego political consultant Jack Orr, who directed the fight against rent control in East Palo Alto.

East Palo Alto's city council enacted the rent control law in November, but opponents circulated petitions to put it into abeyance. On Tuesday, East Palo Alto voters decided by 1,522-1,135 to let the law stand.

Tuesday's results in East Palo Alto will not affect referendums in other towns, said spokesmen on both sides of the issue, because East Palo Alto differs economically and politically from other California towns. The city is an impoverished community where minorities make up 40 percent and renters 54 percent of the population; Los Gatos, Burlingame and Cotati, on the other hand, have higher median incomes, fewer renters and older residents who tend to vote more conservatively on such issues.

In Los Gatos, about 37 percent of residents are renters, according to the 1980 census. East Palo Alto "is a foreign marketplace compared to our area," said Marlene Rodman, a Los Gatos real estate broker and rent control opponent who said she believes the East Palo Alto vote probably will have no impact on Los Gatos.

Rodman said a lot of construction is under way in Los Gatos that will benefit senior citizens, so she is confident they will support the initiative drive. The community has a no-growth posture, she said, and "that has a tendency to make rents higher. And they should be higher if people don't want growth in an area."

Opponents of East Palo Alto's rent control law blamed their loss Tuesday — despite a \$61,000 campaign war chest — on a poor turnout by homeowners at the polls. Political consultant Orr,

who directed the campaign, said his group would have been more successful in a general election than in the special referendum.

Tuesday's outcome may bode ill for the property rights initiative in East Palo Alto itself, said Edrick Haggans, chairman of the East Palo Alto Private Property Rights Committee. Haggans said Wednesday that his organization might do better to focus its time, money and effort on a recall of four city council members than to push for the initiative.

However, Burlingame property rights advocate David Behling, a real estate broker, said rent control advocates in East Palo Alto "haven't set us back in the least." Behling, a Burlingame real estate broker and treasurer of the newly formed Burlingame Private Property Rights Committee, said, "Burlingame may as well be in a different state from East Palo Alto."

David Nesson, chairman of the Burlingame Rent Coalition, which favors rent ceilings, agreed. He conceded that the Burlingame property rights initiative has a good chance of passing.

Nesson said East Palo Alto's rent law vote won't have any effect in Burlingame, where about 44 percent of the population rent their homes.

"This community is a different type of structure. It's a 'captured' community, where there's little room for the addition of rental property."

Cotati Councilwoman Linda Shorey, who unsuccessfully filed a lawsuit against the property rights initiative there, said the rent control battle in East Palo Alto hasn't sparked much interest in her town of 4,000. Though more than half of all dwellings in Cotati are rental units, Shorey and other rent control advocates hope to enlist homeowners in their effort to defeat the initiative, she said.