

# A difficult childhood for Peninsula's youngest city

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Five years ago this month, the city of East Palo Alto was born.

After a bitter battle, incorporation of the 18,000-person city won by just 15 votes, but East Palo Alto's internal conflicts had just begun.

During its first three years, the

city fought repeated challenges to its legitimacy as opponents contested the vote for cityhood.

The vote stood, as the California Supreme Court ruled in favor of the city in 1986 and the U.S. Supreme Court rejected an appeal.

By 1987, East Palo Alto was grappling with another crisis: financial mismanagement. It had used up reserves accumulated during its first

two years, when San Mateo County helped support the fledgling city.

The same year, acting City Manager James White resigned after allegedly giving himself illegal raises and abusing a city credit card to pay for co-workers' lunches.

To balance the budget, the city staff imposed harsh austerity measures, including cutting the number

of police in the crime-riddled, drug-infested city.

Last month, Officer Joel Davis was shot to death in a drug-related incident, the first East Palo Alto police officer killed in the line of duty.

The killing has refocused attention on the city and its problems, particularly drug-related crime, leading county officials to join with

civic leaders in seeking solutions for the troubled city.

Despite a long list of problems, civic and police leaders remain optimistic about the community's future.

They envision new development, which will bring in revenue to beef up police protection, and they see

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some victories in the crusade against crime and drugs.

Some city leaders hope a new stadium for the San Francisco Giants will be located in East Palo Alto, providing new jobs and revenue.

Others foresee new stores that will keep shoppers in the city, rather than forcing them and their dollars across the Bayshore Freeway.

East Palo Alto has been mired in controversy from its first City Council meeting, when the council voted to freeze rents for 90 days, to its most recent council meeting, when former Mayor John Bostic and former Vice Mayor Warnell Coats were ousted from those posts, after Bostic pleaded no contest to an election related misdemeanor.

Five years ago, the rent freeze pitted renters against landlords, and a rent control ordinance was later passed.

"It was the worst move we could have ever made," said Gertrude Wilks, the only member of the original five-person council to vote against rent control. "As a new city trying to make it, we can't afford any shade trees for anybody."

James Blakey, a former mayor who voted for the ordinance, said it protected citizens while ensuring a fair profit for landlords. "It kept the community intact," he

said.

Councilman Warnell Coats disagreed. The law has held rents to artificially low levels, he said, giving property owners no incentive to maintain apartments or houses.

Due to dilapidation, there has been an "80 to 90 percent rental turnover," as the original occupants have moved on to better places as they could afford it, Coats said.

"I lived in apartments for 10 or 12 years — now I wouldn't. The only change has been rent control," he said.

Another early issue that divided the community was whether to acquire the Ravenswood High School site for a civic center and park.

After lengthy negotiations with the Sequoia Union High School District, the city purchased the 30-acre campus for \$1.8 million, with the aid of a \$1 million community development block grant.

"That's one of the hearts of the community," Blakey said. "The community needed open space."

However, Councilman John Bostic said the city threw money "down a rathole," attempting to convert the site to a civic center and park.

Irresponsible spending and inept fiscal management led East Palo Alto to make drastic cuts in services, Bostic and Coats said.

Five officers and seven civilian employees were slashed from the police department last year when

budget problems came to light, said City Manager Stan Hall, who replaced White last August.

Before the cuts, "we had a handle on crime," said East Palo Alto Police Sgt. Nick Bennett. "Homicides, felony assaults and violent crimes were down because of our presence."

In 1987, four murders occurred in East Palo Alto. In the first half of 1988, there were seven. The slaying of Officer Davis heightened awareness of the gutted police department's needs, and last month the City Council voted to give officers an 8 percent pay hike.

"We're not able to keep the pressure on to keep them off balance," Bennett said. "It's a direct result of cuts in the force."

Bennett blamed former city officials' bungling for the present austerity.

"Somebody in charge (wasted) away that money, and the community suffered," he said.

City officials are looking to new development to enlarge the city's tax base and ease its financial and unemployment woes. Several large projects are under review, including University Centre, a De Monet Industries proposal that would transform the Whiskey Gulch area into a complex of offices, retail stores, a hotel and a theater.

Economic growth, redevelopment, creating jobs and expanding job training are top priorities for the city, Bostic said.

A new City Council that appears

## East Palo Alto: a difficult birth

**June 1983:** Incorporation is approved by 15 votes. The election is contested in San Mateo County Superior Court.

**July 1983:** The city of East Palo Alto is born.

**October 1983:** The election victory of incorporation is upheld by the San Mateo County Superior Court.

**August 1984:** A Court of Appeal reverses the Superior Court decision, ruling that up to 94 votes were cast illegally.

**August 1986:** Incorporation is reaffirmed by the California Supreme Court, overturning the Court of Appeal decision and ruling that incorporation stands.

**January 1987:** The U.S. Supreme Court refuses to hear an appeal, ending possible court challenges to incorporation.

to be more pro-development was elected in April. The new council can "breathe fresh life" into development projects, Bostic said.

Coats said development is bound to succeed because land is cheap in East Palo Alto and available sites in surrounding cities are few and far between.

"I don't think we can screw it up — the pressure is so great," Coats said. "But it will be easier if there is stability in government and an effective police department."

Bennett and others see a light at the end of East Palo Alto's dark tunnel.

"This city's going to make it," he said. "It's a tough little town, a tenacious community. So is the po-

lice department."

One indication of the preoccupation with its perpetual crises is that no one planned a celebration for the city's fifth birthday, which occurred July 1.

Failure to mark the birthday may not have been that surprising, considering that East Palo Alto was recovering from losing a police officer while grappling with excruciating budget decisions.

Councilwoman Barbara Mouton, the city's first mayor, said the simple fact that East Palo Alto still exists is an extraordinary achievement.

"I will never doubt incorporation," she said. "In spite of all the barriers, we succeeded and we're still alive."

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