

"I'd jump up and down if we had a supermarket here."

— DEE UHILA, A LEADER IN EAST PALO ALTO'S PACIFIC ISLANDER COMMUNITY



NHAT V. MEYER — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Sonia Neri picks out some tomatoes with her 2-year-old daughter, Karla Cecilia Montano Neri, at La Nacional, a small neighborhood grocery store in East Palo Alto.

East P.A. clamoring for a supermarket

COALITION HOPES CITY WILL HELP END LONG WAIT

By **Thaai Walker**
Mercury News

The Safeway grocery store left East Palo Alto in the 1970s, when Kyle Spencer was just a boy, as did the Co-op Market where he used to run after school for candy.

Spencer, now a father of three, travels five miles down the freeway to another city for his family's grocery shopping, just as his parents did back then.

The Home Depot and Good Guys have opened here in recent years. But for more than two decades, Spencer and others living in East Palo Alto have had to do without one of the essentials that makes a place a community: a supermarket.

Struggling areas such as Harlem in New York and parts of Las Vegas and Atlanta have faced similar difficulties luring neighborhood supermarkets, banks and other services, which more affluent communities take for granted.

But now, in East Palo Alto, the call for a supermarket is back and as loud as it's ever been.

Pushing for a full-service grocery store this time around is an alliance of church pastors, community activists and residents like Spencer who



East Palo Alto residents rely on small grocery stores like La Nacional. They must travel out of town to go to a supermarket.

this month asked city officials to team up with them to bring a supermarket to this city of 28,000 residents.

The coalition isn't the only group to place the issue in the forefront once again. A Palo Alto car dealer late last year excited residents when he said he could deliver a supermarket — but only if allowed to put a car dealership on an attractive

GROCERY | East P.A. is tired of waiting

Continued from Page 1A

piece of highway frontage land.

While the two groups may have different agendas, they share this belief: Perhaps never before has there been a better time to persuade a supermarket operator to come to the city.

Over the years, East Palo Alto residents have been caught between hope and disappointment as attempts to coax a market to the city repeatedly failed. Supermarket chains such as Lucky's and Safeway turned down invitations, saying that the city's predominantly low-income population wasn't large enough to support a store.

Things have changed in the past few years, many point out. The population of East Palo Alto has grown, more people with higher incomes are moving in, and big-box retail chains and developers have taken a gamble on the town and shown that business can be done there. Even the Four Seasons luxury hotel chain is considering an East Palo Alto location.

But perhaps just as importantly, some say, residents are more determined than ever.

"See, this thing has been on the drawing board so many times and then nothing happens," said East Palo Alto pastor Floyd Purdy, a member of Peninsula Interfaith Action, the coalition of San Mateo County and Santa Clara County churches that asked the city to work on identifying a site and operator within six months.

"People are tired. They're frustrated. Residents feel that if it will ever happen it will happen now."

In California, East Palo Alto's long struggle to get a full-service supermarket is the same one that has played out in communities such as West Oakland and South Central

Los Angeles — neglected places that learned long ago to live without the conveniences, places where residents often feel as though their needs aren't considered as important as those of people living in cities where problems are fewer and dollars more plentiful.

"It feels like we're out in the middle of nowhere," said Spencer, who shops at the Costco in Mountain View. "Sometimes you're already home and it's late and you've got to get in the car and go far away to get what you should be able to go down the street to get — like diapers."

Recently, retailers have started investing in East Palo Alto and similar communities — some spurred by private and public urban investment initiatives. But while East Palo Alto residents say Home Depot and Starbucks are certainly welcome, they're still waiting for the basics.

Here, where inconvenience has become a way of life, residents have learned to make do. For some, that means relying on buses or friends to reach a supermarket.

"It's what we do in our community, we help each other, but shoot, I'd jump up and down if we had a supermarket here," said Dee Uhila, a leader in the city's Pacific Islander community. "Then I wouldn't have to worry about people needing rides."

Many go to convenience stores scattered about the city for small things. Guadalupe Gonzalez goes to one when she runs out of tortillas.

But when she needs to buy steak or the five-gallon tub of vanilla ice cream her children love, she must carefully plan a trip to the Albertson's on Channing Avenue, near Embarcadero Road in Palo Alto. Going after work sometimes risks getting snagged in commuter traffic on her way home.



Henry Leyva, owner of La Nacional market in East Palo Alto, bags groceries for customers.

NHAT V. MEYER — MERCURY NEWS

"I have to think, 'Do I stop now and get what I need or will it make me late to pick up the kids?'" said Gonzalez, 29.

The last big push for a supermarket occurred six years ago, when a non-profit developer talked to a dozen food retailers. All said no.

Last year, the East Palo Alto Community Law Project decided to make the problem a project. They've focused on identifying outside funding that the city could use to lure a supermarket operator.

But it wasn't until Palo Alto Honda dealer John Anderson offered to deliver a supermarket late last year that the issue became hot again.

Anderson, a lanky man who goes by the nickname "Big Dog Anderson," wants a 10-acre site in the city's retail shopping center. It would give him room to build a bigger dealership — visible from Highway 101.

Anderson proposed a dealership and an Old Navy clothing store for the site two years ago but was beat out by an Ikea furniture store proposal. Ikea later ran into a series of roadblocks, primarily because of concerns over traffic.

Redevelopment officials told Anderson that if Ikea failed, he would be more likely to get a second look if he included a supermarket. Some residents liked the idea: At council meetings they waved Anderson's fliers, yelling that they wanted food, not furniture.

The future of the controversial Ikea project will be determined by voters in the March 5 election. For now, Anderson is simply waiting. He and his

partner, Palo Alto developer Roxy Rapp, say they have letters of interest from three unnamed grocery retailers.

"I told John I will deliver a grocery store because I have the contacts," said Rapp, who is working on a project in Los Altos that includes a Safeway supermarket. Safeway officials declined to comment.

Some say the past proves there are no guarantees.

"If it were an easy problem, it would have been solved," said Mayor Duane Bay.

Bay says that next month, the city council, as part of its partnership with Peninsula Interfaith Action, will consider appointing a supermarket task force.

"It might take a lot of time, people might lose a little faith, but I think people are committed to make it happen," Spencer said.

Contact Thaa Walker at twalker@sjmercury.com or (650) 688-7581.