

C. G. Grant

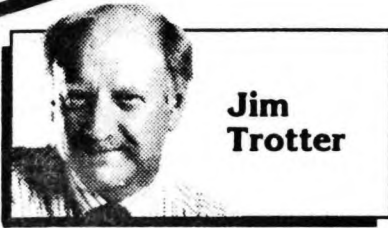
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Jim
Trotter

High stakes in turf battle

WE ARE standing in Bell Street Park in East Palo Alto on a sunny afternoon. Rush hour traffic is building on University Avenue. Directly across the street is City Hall Annex. This is the park where police once maintained a fence — not to keep undesirables out, but to keep drug dealers in.

The dealers kept cutting through the fence to make street sales. Finally the fence was given up. There was a murder here last week, which was nothing new.

Before the park was conceded, there was a swimming pool here, with a poolside structure that still stands — now a dusty concrete hole in the ground, weeds growing through the cracks. As we walk around the pool, a dealer appears in a door frame on the other side and fixes us with a glare.

"Just act like we're casually walking away," said city consultant C.G. Grant. And that's what we do, retreat toward the car. As I walk away, I study my map of East Palo Alto, the poverty and drug-beset little town that is segregated by Highway 101 from its bank of wealthy neighbors to the west — Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Atherton.

BELL STREET Park is an important spot on this map. I mark it. It is the site of a coming battle. Mayor Bill Vines and other East Palo Alto leaders are going to try to retake the park. They plan to build a new swimming pool, athletic facilities, and a senior center there.

That may sound like an ordinary enough municipal venture, but in East Palo Alto it is a plan of great practical and symbolic import.

First, there is no public swimming pool in the city, no place for schoolchildren to swim or to learn how. The demographics of those schoolchildren are 98 percent minority — black or Hispanic. Eighty percent qualify for free or reduced lunches, which speaks to the economic status of their families. A third of the children are from welfare families. Another 400 plus are from migrant families.

While there is no pool and little in the way of recreational facilities, the drug dealers literally flag you down from the street. The kids are easy prey.

"You must have a way to break a cycle," said Vines, who has been mayor of East Palo Alto for a year. "In cities where they've engaged youngsters in wholesome recreation, they've had the best success in breaking the cycle."

Symbolically, the pool will be a message to the dealers. "The dealers think the park belongs to them," said Vines. "It belongs to the citizens and that's where it's going to wind up."

Vines and others believe the citizenry will embrace this cause.

'WE WANT to restore the city's ability to believe in itself," said Grant. "There is never in any human being a 100 percent lack of willingness to believe something good can happen."

Even so, it will not be easy. The half-million-dollar price tag is a huge sum to a city with an almost non-existent tax base.

Even worse, Caltrans has a proposal to six-lane University Avenue from the Bayshore Freeway to Dumbarton Bridge, which would devastate the Bell Street Park area, as well as divide an already shut-off town. This is a separate issue, but clearly a community shouldn't be destroyed for the convenience of commuters who pass through.

"That proposal is pretty hard to stomach," said Vines.

In waging a war on drugs, Vines said he hopes to revitalize East Palo Alto. There is talk of redevelopment that will stimulate the tax base.

"But along with redevelopment, we have to show our citizens that their needs, the things they want as individuals, are coming along at the same time. That's when they will buy in."

East Palo Alto needs help. All kinds of help. But it also needs understanding. It's not the no-man's land we outsiders perceive, but a community of people among us. They shouldn't have to stand alone.

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