

EDITORIALS

Time to slow down

A BATTLE is brewing over East Palo Alto's ambitious plans to redevelop its Whiskey Gulch area, but with a little common sense and cooperation this battle need not be joined.

Whiskey Gulch's makeover into University Circle is of paramount importance to East Palo Alto. After struggling fiscally through its first five years of cityhood, it sees its first real opportunity for economic development. The project envisioned represents a major addition to the city's tax base, and one that could very well spawn other developments elsewhere in the city. With revenues flowing into the city, some unmet challenges — crime control being foremost among them — could be adequately addressed at last.

But this area's redevelopment is also important beyond the East Palo Alto city limits. The University Circle project, proposed by San Mateo developer Joaquin DeMonet, is one of the biggest projects, in both size and business scope, ever proposed on the Peninsula. Its twin towers would be 70 feet taller than the tallest building in Palo Alto. With its 340,000 square feet of office space, 10-screen cinema, 244-room hotel and retail complex, it would generate about 3,000 new jobs. And because Whiskey Gulch is located on the west-of-Bayshore side of East Palo Alto, the project's environmental impact would be as great on Palo Alto and Menlo Park as it would be on East Palo Alto itself.

Clearly this is a project that warrants not only thorough environmental review but more participation than usual from neighboring communities.

And that's where the trouble may be starting.

Menlo Park and Palo Alto officials feel the draft environmental impact report for the project is flawed to the point of violating state law; both cities have asked the East Palo Alto City Council to have the report rewritten and recirculated for review.

The cities' critiques of the report do raise some significant questions:

- The report never mentions the DeMonet project but only alludes generally to a development that matches the de-

scription of the project. Since DeMonet's has been the only project on the table for several months, why not study its specific impacts?

- Neighboring officials feel the report downplays or is vague regarding impacts on traffic, parking and the region's jobs-housing ratio. Doesn't a project of this size demand a full discussion of these impacts and all feasible mitigations?

- The report includes only two alternatives to its DeMonet-like project, one similar to the current buildings' size and the other even larger than DeMonet's plan. A scaled-down, "compromise" version of DeMonet's project would not be feasible economically, according to the report, but how do the authors support that all-important conclusion?

It's time to answer these questions and others as the project is studied in more depth. But thus far East Palo Alto's response has been to hurry up. The city shortened the normal review period for the report by 15 days, in hopes of approving the report in 1988 and thereby realizing some tax revenue from the project this year.

Hurrying the process doesn't always deliver the project. Witness the state Department of Transportation's rushed environmental review of the inland bypass of Highway 1 at Devil's Slide. Environmental groups sued on procedural grounds 2½ years ago, and the project has been in court ever since — without a foot of roadway laid.

East Palo Alto should comply with its neighbors' request. If a more thorough review involving neighboring cities means the loss of a few months — and short-term tax and financing advantages — then so be it. The development of a project with input from all affected cities, and meaningful mitigations, is a far more positive scenario than a rush toward a confrontation in court.

No Peninsula city operates in a vacuum. As with so many other issues here, this redevelopment plan involves more than just one city. We hope that East Palo Alto will deliberate, and that its neighbors can contribute, in a cooperative and mutually respectful manner.