

'Raped' community incorporated in self-defense

By Stephen Robitaille
Mercury News Staff Writer

In the fight to incorporate East Palo Alto, community leaders argued that the city needed to help itself because it certainly hadn't received much help from its neighbors over the years.

As East Palo Alto Councilwoman Barbara Mouton put it: "We were raped."

In the 1920s, Palo Alto bought 1,455 acres of East Palo Alto property from private owners and built its airport, golf course, yacht harbor and sewage treatment plant there.

In 1964, Palo Alto annexed the land in a property swap with San Mateo County. Palo Alto rerouted San Francisquito Creek, which delineated the county border, to accommodate the change.

In 1954, Menlo Park annexed Belle Haven, which included a helicopter plant. Four years later, it annexed the 62-acre future home of the Menlo Business Park. Menlo Park also has taken nearly all of East Palo Alto's bay lands.

When the state proposed the Dumbarton Bridge expansion in the 1970s, Palo Alto and Menlo Park feared traffic snarls and filed

suit to halt it.

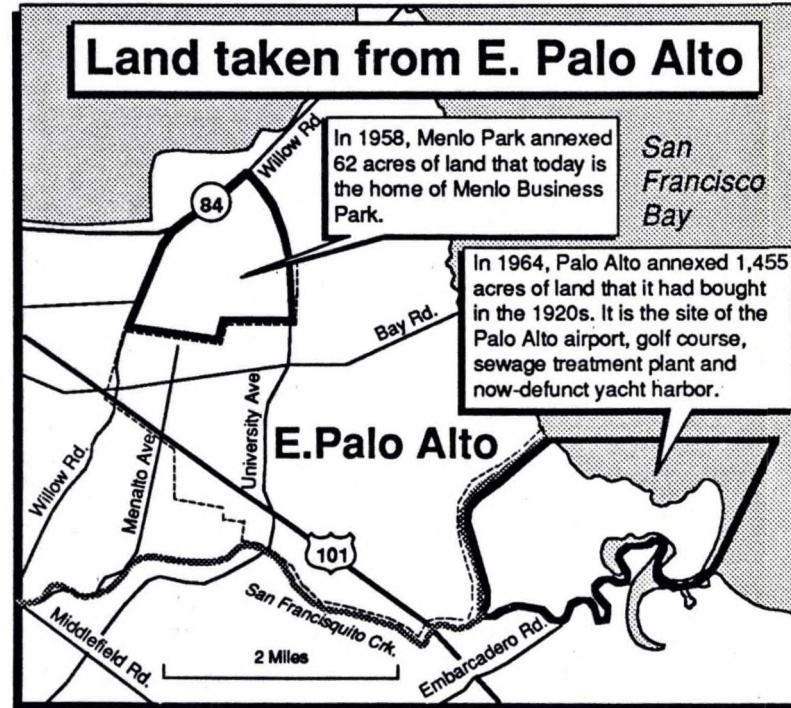
As part of a settlement, Palo Alto killed an artery from the bridge to Embarcadero Road — virtually guaranteeing that the majority of bridge commuters would pass through East Palo Alto and east Menlo Park.

By the time East Palo Alto incorporated as a city in 1983, it found itself hemmed in physically and politically by its two powerful neighbors.

The distrust between East Palo Alto and its neighbors continues. Palo Alto and one of its homeowners' groups filed suit in December to block an East Palo Alto redevelopment plan seen as the first step toward a stronger tax base for the city.

The plan would allow construction of a \$325 million office, hotel and entertainment complex in the Whiskey Gulch district, where Palo Altans bought their liquor in the late 1800s because their town was dry.

The San Mateo County Board of Supervisors, which governed East Palo Alto until its incorporation, also raised the wrath of some residents, both for agreeing to the annexations and for its governing



Mercury News

policies.

The board apparently was taken aback when blacks first began to assume political power. In a 1966 election, three blacks were elected

to the five-member Alta Park Council, the first time blacks were a majority on the local advisory board.

The supervisors invalidated the

results.

"They had the election again, and we won again," said Gertrude Wilks, one of the successful candidates.

So the county set up the East Palo Alto Municipal Council, an advisory body to the board, that lasted until incorporation.

In 1977, then-U.S. Rep. Pete McCloskey expressed his support for incorporation, pointing out that East Palo Alto, the county's poorest district, had the county's highest property tax assessment.

He also accused the county of using East Palo Alto's unemployment rate to qualify for \$2 million in federal employment program grants and then spending the money elsewhere.

Wilks said that when tax-cutting Proposition 13 passed in 1978, the first place the county looked to slash the budget was in services for East Palo Alto.

"We negotiated with the supervisors for eight days straight," said Wilks. "I was scared to go get a cup of coffee because I'd come back and something else might be gone."

The San Mateo County Sheriff's Department also proved unpopular

with residents, who perceived the majority of deputies as oppressive and hostile.

"I was sitting with (the late Sheriff) Brendan Maguire and (current Sheriff) Len Cardoza, talking about crime, when Cardoza pointed to a man walking in the Nairobi (Center) lot who had just opened a bottle and was drinking it," said Mouton.

"He said, 'That would never happen in my town, but that's part of the lifestyle here,'" Mouton recalled. "I got so mad I just said, 'That's it,' and walked out."

Cardoza said he could not remember the incident.

"I think that's just politics on (Mouton's) part, that's just a political statement," he said.

Cardoza also said he could not recall a statement he made at a June 1988 board of supervisors meeting that he had never been to East Palo Alto. The sheriff, who commanded the sheriff's East Palo Alto substation in 1969-71, made the statement during a discussion of the city's drug-trafficking problem.