

EAST PALO ALTO

Residents seek legal help to expel sex offender

■ Neighbors frightened by convicted rapist's release; council considers adopting resolution

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An East Palo Alto man upset by the release of a convicted rapist to his neighborhood said Monday he is working with about 300 residents to find an attorney who would voluntarily work to expel the man.

Mel Harris, who lives several doors down from the house on Beech Street that 57-year-old Donald Robinson moved into last Thursday after his release from a state mental hospital, said he and others want to take legal action to protect women in the neighborhood.

In 1976 and 1984, Robinson was convicted of sexually assaulting women. He completed his last prison sentence in 1997 but has since undergone a four-phase treatment for "sexually violent predators" as part of a state law aimed

at inmates deemed likely to re-offend.

The city and police department have expressed their displeasure about Robinson's release to East Palo Alto, where he apparently lived prior to his convictions in Santa Clara County. The council will consider a resolution opposing his release at tonight's meeting, and Harris said many residents plan to speak on the item.

Meanwhile, a number of community members have delivered letters to the landlords of Robinson's new home, protesting their decision to rent to him.

"The landlord is who created the problem," Harris said. "In fact, he kicked people out. There was a nice family there."

Two unincorporated Redwood City men listed as the property's owners did not return a phone call requesting comment Monday.

Under a court order by Judge Alfonso Fernandez, the state will pay

Robinson's expenses while keeping him under close surveillance at the Beech Street house. It remains unclear how much those expenses will add up to, but Santa Clara County Deputy District Attorney Dana Overstreet said the price tag is likely hefty since it already costs about \$150,000 a year to keep a prisoner in a state hospital.

"Per capita it's far more expensive to have them in the community, but it's their constitutional right to be treated in the least restrictive environment possible," Overstreet said.

"If the treatment that they're given at the state hospital works, then he should be less of a risk than just your average sex offender," she added. "What the public doesn't realize is ... how many sex offenders are released every day. When it's publicized, people have this visceral reaction."

Defense attorney Jean Matulis has

worked on similar cases and agreed that offenders who have received medical help generally pose less of a threat — but state officials may spend months or even years searching for a city in which to place them.

"The person becomes sort of a firebrand for all of the community's fears about sex offenders," Matulis said. "Ironically, the individual being released is probably one of the least dangerous sex offenders you could find because he has been through a battery of treatment and is subject to all sorts of monitoring."

Such patients are often "less dangerous than many people who are required to register as sex offenders with little or no supervision," she said.

Authorities previously released a few sexually violent predators to San Mateo County, Assistant District Attorney Karen Guidotti said, adding that none have re-offended as far as she knows.

Judge Fernandez chose an East Palo Alto home for Robinson over one in Daly City that was surrounded by six schools, officials say.

Neither location is compliant with Jessica's Law, which governs how close a registered sex offender can live to schools and other areas where children congregate. But East Palo Alto police Chief Ron Davis said at a meeting last week that the law may not apply to Robinson, since he has no record of assaulting minors. At least one of his victims was a senior citizen, Davis said.

East Palo Alto police Capt. John Chalmers said Monday there had been no serious problems since Robinson moved into the home, but police have stepped up patrols in the area.

"What we are concerned about is keeping peace and the safety of all citizens involved, which includes him and the rest of the community," Chalmers said. "We're monitoring the situation very closely."