

Local News

MENLO PARK | AHERTON | WOODSIDE | PORTOLA VALLEY

Facebook gives \$20M to stem displacement

By Kate Bradshaw

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Facebook's public commitment to give \$20 million over five years to stem the displacement of local residents around its headquarters comes after months of negotiations with a nonprofit coalition called "Envision, Transform, Build - East Palo Alto," according to community organizer Tameeka Bennett.

Ms. Bennett is the executive director of Youth United for Community Action, a nonprofit that is part of the coalition.

That may explain, perhaps, why the suggested threat of a lawsuit and negative public comments coming from nonprofit workers and activists in East Palo Alto largely dissipated in the weeks prior to Menlo Park's approval of Facebook's expansion plans last month.

Facebook's expansion project, which includes two large office buildings and a hotel, is expected to add 6,550 workers to Menlo Park and was approved unanimously by the City Council on Nov. 1.

Several months ago, Ms.

Bennett said, while Menlo Park was working out a development agreement with Facebook, the coalition presented the company with a list of actions it could take to ease its impact on the local housing market.

"It started with us really looking for a partnership," she said, but added that if Facebook had not been willing to talk, the coalition was prepared to take the social media behemoth to court.

Housing fund

The bulk of Facebook's contribution, or \$18.5 million, will go toward establishing what's being called a "Catalyst Housing Fund," the company announced Dec. 2.

The fund will be overseen by an advisory board with representatives from Facebook, the cities of Menlo Park and East Palo Alto, and the Envision, Transform, Build - East Palo Alto coalition.

The expectation is that \$10 million of that fund will be set aside for East Palo Alto residents, according to a draft agreement the East Palo Alto City Council was scheduled to consider Dec. 6. That agreement, which is separate but contains some overlapping

measures with Facebook's Dec. 2 announcement, also says that Facebook will contribute to East Palo Alto \$200,000 for a culinary skills program and \$2.5 million for traffic improvements.

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COMMUNITY ORGANIZER
TAMEEKA BENNETT

While more than half of the initial investment for the Catalyst Housing Fund will be in East Palo Alto, the fund is intended to be regional in scope and attract more funding from corporate, community and governmental sources, according to the Facebook announcement. The fund will be used by a yet-to-be-determined "mission-driven third party" that will work on projects the group identifies that meet its criteria, a Facebook spokesperson said.

Facebook said it will also:

■ Put \$625,000 into a job-training program that emphasizes the fields of science, technology,

engineering and math.

■ Give \$250,000 to Rebuilding Together Peninsula, a nonprofit that provides home repairs and renovations for low-income homeowners.

■ Give \$500,000 to an emergency assistance fund for people who are being displaced because of eviction, unsafe living conditions or "other forms of landlord abuse," according to a statement by Elliot Schrage, Facebook vice president for public policy and communications.

That fund is expected to be overseen by Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto, Ms. Bennett said.

"We need an all-hands-on-deck approach to tackle our housing challenges in Silicon Valley," said Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Menlo Park, in a statement. "This partnership ... holds great promise to bring about the affordable housing so critically needed in our area."

Negotiations

In the months before Menlo Park approved the Facebook expansion last month, the East Palo Alto nonprofit coalition had been following Facebook's

proposal closely.

That coalition includes the nonprofits Youth United for Community Action, Faith in Action Bay Area, Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto and "Comite de Vecinos del Lado Oeste, East Palo Alto," a Facebook spokesperson said.

The organizations in the coalition lent their expertise to the cause, whether to read through environmental impact reports or track deadlines and procedures necessary to file for litigation, Ms. Bennett said. They received support from the ACLU Foundation of Northern California, Public Advocates Inc., and the Law Office of Julian Gross, according to Facebook.

Despite a Facebook-funded study that predicted a limited increase in local housing demand caused by Facebook, many community members expressed concern that the expansion would exacerbate the displacement of lower-income households from the area.

Many housing listings in Belle Haven in eastern Menlo Park

See **FACEBOOK**, page 20

FACEBOOK

continued from page 5

and East Palo Alto emphasize proximity to Facebook and other tech campuses as a major selling point, according to a letter to the city of Menlo Park written by East Palo Alto City Manager Carlos Martinez.

"We wanted to ... get them to

understand the implications this project would have," Ms. Bennett said.

In the negotiations, it was agreed that the nonprofits involved would not receive any of the money. All of it, she said, would go toward separate funds to combat displacement.

Ms. Bennett emphasized that in addition to providing money for the housing fund, Facebook plans

to be involved as a member of the advisory board and in following through on the agreement terms.

"I have not seen low-income communities most affected by the brunt of displacement and poverty be at the table (as) equal partners with a giant like Facebook," she said. "We're vanguards in creating this. ... It's a huge advocacy win for us." ▣