

Menlo-EPA Merger Stirs Little Enthusiasm

A report suggesting Menlo Park should annex East Palo Alto drew generally poor reviews on both sides of the Bayshore Freeway last week.

The report stated that annexation to Menlo Park would provide the unincorporated, predominantly minority community of East Palo Alto with better municipal services at a lower cost, along with an opportunity to ease the Peninsula's jobs-housing imbalance.

Officials in Menlo Park and East Palo Alto said, however, that East

Palo Altans should be able to make up their own minds.

"We incorporated and every other city on the Peninsula incorporated," said Menlo Park Councilmember Peg Gunn. "I think they should have the opportunity to do the same if they want to."

"I look at this as just one more barrier we must step over in order to achieve cityhood. We know we must incorporate," said East Palo Alto Municipal Councilmember Barbara Moulton.

The report, the draft environmental impact report (EIR) for the Menlo Park/East Palo Alto and Districts Sphere of Influence Study, was prepared recently by the San Mateo County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) in order to determine East Palo Alto's governmental future.

Menlo Park Councilmember Gerry Andeen was one of the few city officials speaking with the Recorder who supported the LAFCO report. "I'm in favor of annexing East

Palo Alto," Andeen said. "I see that 10 years downstream there's a future for that community if they're working together with Menlo Park. Instead of the two communities pulling in different directions, they should be pulling together."

Andeen agreed with the report's finding that annexation would help ease the jobs-housing imbalance.

Annexation would reduce the need for East Palo Alto to strengthen its tax base, so it could develop its remaining land with housing instead of industry, the report said.

"If we're telling East Palo Alto not to put in an industrial park, then we should incorporate them," An-

deen said. "The problem is that East Palo Alto sees itself differently than we see it. We have a jobs-housing imbalance. Everyone seems to understand it except East Palo Alto. They see new industry as a source of money."

But East Palo Alto Municipal Councilmember Berkeley Driessal said that Proposition 13 has changed the rules in the financial game.

"The idea that incorporation would worsen the jobs-housing imbalance is based on an incorrect assumption," Driessal said. "In many cases, we could get more revenue out of residential than industrial development," he said.

Driessal said that since housing turns over much faster than industrial property, it can have its assessed value raised more frequently under Prop. 13 guidelines, generating more tax dollars for local governments.

"The final report will have to take into account the changed financial picture in the state," he said. "This report shouldn't be taken very seriously."

Driessal said the LAFCO report failed to take into account important political considerations as well.

"I sincerely doubt the majority of voters in Menlo Park would want to assume the responsibility of an-

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nexing an area that would so drastically affect the character of their city," he said. "Our municipal council and the majority of people in East Palo Alto want to be independent."

Gunn called the idea of annexing East Palo Alto "presumptuous." She disagreed with the report's suggestion that joining the two communities would create a more racially balanced city.

"It takes a whole lot more than changing political boundaries to integrate a community," she said. Gunn added that annexation could actually serve to polarize the two communities.

"Annexing people that don't want to be annexed is sure to cause resentment," Gunn said.

The Menlo Park Councilmember said the idea that annexing East Palo Alto would help ease the jobs-housing imbalance is based incorrectly on the notion that Menlo Park would be sure to build housing on East Palo Alto's remaining land.

"I have no guarantees we'd build more housing," she said.

Mouton said East Palo Alto would be no better off becoming part of Menlo Park.

"Look at Belle Haven in Menlo Park," she said. "The citizens there are no better off than the citizens of East Palo Alto and they're within Menlo Park's boundaries."

According to Mouton, annexation to Menlo Park wouldn't necessarily create a more racially balanced city.

"We (East Palo Alto) are one of the most integrated communities on the Peninsula. We have Blacks, Whites, Hispanics and Asians. People of all races are welcomed in East Palo Alto. We accept the people Atherton and Hillsborough don't want."

Mouton estimated the extra cost of providing municipal services in her community would only provide a shortfall of \$60 per household in the first year. "The price of our freedom is only \$60," she said. "There's not a man or woman in this community who wouldn't get out on the street corner with a tin cup to come up with that money," she said.