



Our Town

by Don Kazak

A new beginning?

Local politics is always a tricky business. Palo Alto readers may be either intrigued or put off by how personal differences on the City Council have become headline news in recent weeks.

In Menlo Park, the pendulum has swung to the right, with a new City Council majority, thanks to the Nov. 5 election and subsequent election of Nicholas Jellins as mayor. Although "right" and "left" become harder to translate when it comes down to city business, which consists largely of arguments over development decisions.

One night after being elected mayor, Jellins was on hand at an East Palo Alto City Council meeting where longtime council members Sharifa Wilson and Myrtle Walker stepped down after both deciding not to seek reelection this year.

Jellins, along with a dozen or so East Palo Alto residents, thanked Wilson and Walker for their service and said he hoped the East Palo Alto and Menlo Park city councils can work together on issues that affect both cities.

That means traffic, and that means resurrection of the Southern Connection to the Dumbarton Bridge that East Palo Alto has long wanted but Palo Alto wants no part of. Anyone who can solve that problem will be an official political genius.

Duane Bay, who just stepped down as the major of East Palo Alto, mentioned the Southern Connection in his state-of-the-city address last spring. New Mayor Pat Foster included it on her shopping list of priorities for 2003.

But with the Palo Alto City Council preoccupied with some nasty in-fighting, looking to regional issues may not be in the cards for Palo Alto just now.

That kind of in-fighting characterized the East Palo Alto City Council a decade ago, to the point where nothing got done. The five then-council members were galvanized into cooperation at a council retreat in early 1993, shortly after the FBI declared the city the homicide capital of the country, on a per capita basis, because of the 42 homicides in 1992. Most of those were drug-related street killings.

Palo Alto and Menlo Park, along with the San Mateo County Sheriff's Department and the California Highway Patrol, all lent officers in a concentrated effort to win back East

Palo Alto streets from the drug dealers. It took awhile, but it worked.

The new-found unity on the council there was responsible for getting the city's redevelopment engine going, leading to the University Circle office towers and the shopping center just east of the freeway.

But that unity has split in recent years, leading to a fractured council and a divided populace on development issues. The IKEA issue divided the council badly enough that it couldn't muster the necessary votes to approve IKEA, but it could put it on the ballot.

And in a narrow election March 2, IKEA won, barely.

The new council, with the election of Chris Woodard and David Woods to replace Wilson and Walker, will have its work cut out for it in terms of bringing some civic peace to the city.

The divisions in the city over development, epitomized by IKEA, created bad blood between residents and between council members. Wilson, a three-time mayor with 12 years of service on the council, is most closely identified with the city's new-found beginnings of economic success. She is creative and strong-willed, and became a lightning rod for criticism of the council.

Walker, also a former mayor with nine years of service on the council, is equally strong-willed and became identified closely with dissatisfied residents.

The three holdover council members are more moderate. Bay and Foster were political allies of Wilson, while Donna Rutherford, the new vice mayor, was an ally of Walker.

After covering East Palo Alto for the last decade, I've developed a deep affection for the city, its residents, and their travails.

The changing of the guard in East Palo Alto creates an opportunity to start anew, maybe remembering the unity of early 1993 and what drove five elected officials to put whatever differences they had aside and work for the betterment of their city.

That doesn't happen often in city government, and it was kind of magical that it lasted as long as it did in East Palo Alto.

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