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Some residents of the unincorporated community of East Richmond Heights on the northern border of El Cerrito say annexation would mean better services for them and an economic boost for city.

By Todd Perlman January 11, 2011

On several side streets off Barrett Avenue in El Cerrito, fresh asphalt abuts much older county-maintained roadway to form a visible border line with unincorporated East Richmond Heights.

That line symbolizes the divideHeights resident Richard Leigh and some neighbors want to eliminate with their push for annexation into El Cerrito.

"From a theoretical standpoint, we'd like equal status," said Leigh, a retired credit union CEO who lives on Francisco Way. And from a monetary standpoint, "we think we can help El Cerrito build a stronger financial base."

Leigh, who moved to the Heights in 1973, spoke passionately in favor of annexation at the December El Cerrito City Council meeting, outlining myriad reasons why such action would be good for the city. Perhaps chief among them: East Richmond Heights residents pay nearly \$10 million a year in property taxes, which could mean an additional \$2 million-plus annually to the El Cerrito general fund.

According to a fact sheet submitted by Leigh, "This additional funding from annexation could support: replacing drawn-down city reserves; maintaining current police staffing for special investigations, neighborhood bicycle patrol units, controlling crime and gang prevention; preventing the reduction of Fire Department staffing; preventing forced furloughs of non-sworn employees; and restoring services that already have been cut."

Annexation of the Heights – a community of roughly 1,300 households and 3,400 people that borders the northeast corner of El Cerrito in the hills – isn't a new idea. Various efforts over the years, including serious movements in the early 1970s and mid-1990s, fell short. But November's failure of Measure F, a parcel tax to fund a dedicated county sheriff's deputy for the area, stirred the pot again.

East Richmond Heights shares a deputy with North Richmond, one of Contra Costa County's most crime-ridden communities. That means, residents say, police presence in the Heights is practically nonexistent. Annexation would bring the Heights into the El Cerrito police department fold, as well as provide the benefits of other municipal services, such as fire abatement, storm drain maintenance and street paving.

For Robin Stewart, an El Cerrito resident who with her husband owns the

Francisco Way house in East Richmond Heights that was her mother-in-law's until 2000, police and fire protection offer the best justification for supporting annexation.

"When my mother-in-law lived in the unincorporated section, ... she was always concerned about who would respond if there was a fire," Stewart said. "She has since passed away but nothing has changed, so if (we) are annexed by El Cerrito that's one less thing to worry about."

Measure F received about 60 percent backing but required a two-thirds majority. Still, Leigh said, that vote "is indicative of the strength of support in the community. I don't think there's a better measure than that."

Another Francisco Way resident, Scott Bohning, isn't quite so eager. Yes, he's frustrated each election that he cannot vote for city council candidates, whether in El Cerrito or neighboring Richmond, but he says there are more important fish to fry.

"In a democracy there should not be places without local representation like this," Bohning said. "That said, I do not feel this is a big enough issue to put a lot of energy into, not while we're spending \$2 billion a week on an illegal war and occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan."

El Cerrito also must take the pulse of its current residents, said City Councilman Bill Jones. And if there truly is interest among his council colleagues to pursue annexation, it likely will come up at the city's annual goal-setting session in March.

"The first thing that this council would have to look at is if there's any interest in our community of expanding our boundaries," he said. "Naturally, when you think about these things, you think of advantages – it could bring more money in to provide services.

"But the city would have to see if the additional revenue that comes in will offset the cost of having them in El Cerrito," Jones said. "Unfortunately, the way the economy is these days, you have to consider things like that. We have to assess things like conditions of the road, and street lighting, the extra amount, if any, needed in the area."

Ultimately, the decision for annexation lies with the county's <u>LAFCO</u> — the Local Agency Formation Commission, composed of City Council members, county supervisors, special district members and members of the public. An application for annexation to LAFCO can come by resolution of the City Council or by a petition of affected landowners or registered voters. It must include a map prepared by an engineer, a plan for services, possibly an environmental review, and various other considerations. (See the <u>accompanying story about the LAFCO annexation process</u>.)

LAFCO can approve or deny the application; the choice would go to voters depending on the level of protest from residents against a LAFCO decision. The process can take months or possibly years, said Lou Ann Texeira, Contra Costa LAFCO's executive officer.

El Cerrito is just beginning to skim the surface of Leigh's annexation proposal, which police Chief Sylvia Moir characterized as being in conversation stage.

"It's a global examination – everything from police and fire, to public works and recreation," said Moir, who has met with Leigh to discuss the matter. "All the services that the city of El Cerrito provides, we'd have to examine."

While Moir said it is premature to estimate the costs and real-world impact on crime, annexation would require creation of a new geographic police beat, which by El Cerrito standards means an additional seven sworn officers to patrol the area 24 hours a day, plus professional support staff and equipment.

"The interesting thing for us as a full-service city and police department is it's important for us to examine what this would mean in terms of drain on existing resources and what sort of resources would need to be added," said Moir, who oversees 43 sworn officers. The department is currently testing to fill the city's remaining three authorized spots for a full complement of 46.

"We are committed to annexing in a way that does not dilute the services that our residents enjoy and have become accustomed to," she said.

El Cerrito has mutual aid agreements with the county for emergency services in the Heights, and both are part of the <u>West Contra Costa school district</u>, so the community has much in common with the city, Jones said.

"We just have a responsibility to take a look at all these angles, especially the way the financing is these days," he said. "I'm not necessarily against the idea. I think it needs study, and it may be beneficial to everybody. I think we're just early in the process."

According to LAFCO, most of the East Richmond Heights falls under <u>El Cerrito's sphere of influence</u> – a small pocket is under the city of Richmond's sphere – giving El Cerrito exclusive rights to the area. (See attached map.) The Heights is fully developed with respect to roads, sewage and street lights, Leigh notes, and so would not require much in the way of capital improvements from the city.

Could that work against the proposal?

"Typically, areas that have been built out, older neighborhoods like East Richmond Heights, don't generate the revenue to offset the cost of services," said county Supervisor John Gioia, whose district includes the Heights. "El Cerrito would have to look at it from the standpoint of taxes, and what's their outlay as far as costs to provide services."

"I do believe that having small pockets of unincorporated areas isn't the most efficient way of providing municipal services," he said. "Would it make sense to have that area annexed to El Cerrito or Richmond one day? It would probably make for better efficiency to have one of those two cities provide services, but it comes down to a decision of the residents."

And that decision is already made, Leigh said.

Response to an e-mail that Leigh sent to more than 50 households in the community generated overwhelming support and not one word of protest, he said;

that should be enough for the city to take the issue seriously.

"This is a win-win," he said. "We'd like to join the city, join democracy, and El Cerrito could net \$2 million annually into their general fund."