

## **East Richmond Heights meeting raises questions**

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A meeting to launch a campaign for annexation of East Richmond Heights by El Cerrito attracted roughly 100 residents, but yielded demands for more information instead of support.

Richard Leigh, who lives on Francisco Way, organized the Sunday morning meeting at Tehiyah Day School. It began with presentations by Contra Costa County supervisor John Gioia, who represents this area, and Lou Ann Texiera, executive director of the Local Agency Formation Commission for the county.

It soon became an intense question-and-answer session, mostly about the fiscal impact to residents and El Cerrito, but also about services, service assessments, home values and, finally, whether El Cerrito "wants us."

No El Cerrito officials were on hand to answer the last question, though Leigh said he had invited council members and City Manager Scott Hanin.

Leigh acknowledged the idea was not new -- it was first pursued in 1967 --but touted it now as a way to "help the City of El Cerrito with their fiscal problems."

He noted that El Cerrito had dipped into its reserves to balance recent budgets and that the assessed valuation of East Richmond Heights homes was \$10 million, which would yield increased property tax revenues.

His plan, he said, was to persuade the city to pass a resolution of interest to annex the Heights. He already had requested that action at a city council meeting in December, with no response.

Failing that, another plan would be to present the Contra Costa County Local Agency Formation Commission with petition signatures from at least five percent of the neighborhood's voters or property owners.

However, LAFCO has mapped a "sphere of influence" for El Cerrito that comprises only the southern third of the neighborhood. The rest falls within Richmond's sphere.

Leigh said his plan required having El Cerrito request LAFCO to expand its sphere of influence to all of East Richmond Heights.

Gioia said he could not take sides. But he presided over much of the question and answer session fielding questions regarding services and assessments covered and not covered.

Texiera spelled out the annexation process once LAFCO gets an application or petition. It includes six months to complete required materials; an agreement between El Cerrito and the county to exchange tax revenues for services transferred to the city; approval by the seven-member LAFCO commission; and possible protest hearings. Texiera and Gioia made it clear that El Cerrito would have to pursue annexation if LAFCO received a qualified petition from heights voters or property owners, but could impose prohibitive conditions or requirements.

"Does El Cerrito want us?" a resident asked. "This all depends on [their] expenditures. What guarantee do we have that they will want us when they crunch the numbers?"

"El Cerrito has run a deficit for ten years," Leigh replied. "They have eaten through their reserves. They need our revenue. One fireman told me, 'East Richmond Heights is our ATM.' "

Asked again, "Does El Cerrito want us?" Leigh responded, "the police chief (Sylvia Moir) is crunching the numbers."

"Until we get these numbers, I can't see how we can decide if we want this," another participant asserted, eliciting applause.

One resident scolded Leigh, saying, "This is the third time around. Why is this information not here? It would be nice to have this information available."

Gioia pledged to create a web page with relevant information he could derive. In January, Hanin said "We are not sure it actually would make sense financially when you account for the services to be provided and the likely revenues."

