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PENINSULA INTERFAITH ACTION
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Praying for food

by Don Kazak

Residents often speak passionately before a city council about what a city needs, but sometimes it doesn't hurt to ask for help from above, too.

Nine ministers and 100 or so people gathered at the steps of East Palo Alto City Hall Sunday afternoon to pray for a supermarket.

In a city with 54 churches, the congregations are part of the glue that has held the community together through its most difficult days. Now, the ministers are ratcheting up pressure on the city leaders to bring a supermarket to the city.

The issue has been vexing for the City Council, too. Two large redevelopment projects have been built in the last decade, but the inability to get a supermarket built has been the most glaring failure of the city since its 1983 incorporation.

Not that the city hasn't tried. Both Safeway and Albertson's (then Lucky Stores) reportedly took a long look at the 6-acre site at Bay Road and University Avenue — where a Palo Alto Co-op Market stood in 1970s — and walked away, believing that the city couldn't economically sustain a large supermarket.

After incorporation in 1983, the former grocery store site was a one-stop shopping area — for illegal drugs. Police eventually cleaned that up. Knocking down the shells of the buildings of the former small shopping center was seen, post-incorporation, as a sign of progress and of promise for the future.

But the promise has been a long time coming. The site has lain fallow for almost 20 years.

Now, there is a supermarket developer, Blake Hunt Ventures, that is negotiating with the landowner, a group called Washingtonia, Inc. But negotiations have been going so slowly that the council was scheduled Tuesday night to renew its 2003 development agreement with Blake Hunt, scheduled to expire today (March 16).

Mayor David Woods, who was at Sunday's prayer vigil, threw some cold water of reality on the urgency of the day by telling the crowd that a grand opening of a supermarket within 15 to 20 months is unrealistic. And he warned the crowd that a supermarket may require a subsidy from the city to make the deal happen.

"But it is a priority for the city," Woods said.

The hour-long prayer vigil was uplifting, with a rousing rendition of the hymn "What a Fellowship," led by the Rev. Alvin Macklin IV of New Sweet Home Church of God in Christ. It had people singing along, swaying and clapping.

Ministers offered prayers to the council and city staff, the developer and property owner, the community, the land, and the vision of the community.

"We need our decision-makers to be good stewards over the community," said the Rev. Floyd Purdy of Faith Missionary Baptist Church, who emceed the event. "This community deserves fresh food at fair prices. Our leaders cannot afford to have this time pass us by."

Norma Taylor, a resident of the Runnymede Gardens apartments for seniors and disabled people, said residents there need help to go outside the community to shop.

"It is a hardship for them," she said. "They desperately need a supermarket."

Deacon J.T. Turner of Open Bible Church said that site was "designed to be a blessing to the people." He prayed that if the people holding up completion of an agreement "have a stony heart, remove the stony heart and replace it with a fleshy heart."

And Pastor Clifton Bennett of Walls of Faith Ministries noted that "the Bible says that there is wickedness in high places" and offered a prayer for the council to "exercise righteousness" for the people.

Sunday's event was co-sponsored by the Community Ministerial Alliance of East Palo Alto, Peninsula Interfaith Action and Youth United for Community Action.

The ministers sat on chairs in front of the doors to City Hall, taking turns to speak. Looking up from the parking lot, members of their congregations, many still in church-going clothes, applauded them. The scene added a new dimension to residents' long-standing frustration about having to cross the freeway to buy groceries.

Then Rev. Macklin's strong, clear tenor rang out over the crowd as he led people in singing the hymn.

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