

Community Democracy Online: A Preliminary Report from East Palo Alto, California

Todd Davies, Symbolic Systems Program, Stanford University

Benjamin Sywulka, Class of 2003, Stanford University

Randy Saffold, Plugged In, East Palo Alto (now at San Jose State)

Roma Jhaveri, Class of 2003, Stanford University

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East Palo Alto: By the Numbers

Population ~ 30,000

59% Hispanic/Latino (84% from Mexico)

23-24% Black/African American (down from 60% in 1980)

8-9% Pacific Islander (esp Tongan, Samoan, Fijian)

7% White alone (Anglo)

2-3% Asian

Some facts:

81% of area school children qualify for lunch subsides

52% of residents over 25 never finished high school

65% do not speak English at home (Spanish 54%, Tongan 6%)

more renters than in neighboring areas, living in crowded conditions

higher percentage of families, lower divorce rate than surrounding area
similar rate of transience as surrounding area, but more renters (57%)

One-third of Latino residents report having home Internet access

We estimate less than half of all residents have home Internet access

East Palo Alto: Community Characteristics

City overall:

- culturally vibrant, strong sense of community
- ethnic communities capable of uniting (e.g. around juvenile justice)
- strong emphasis on word-of-mouth and face-to-face interaction
- underlying distrust of city leaders, including orgs with resources

Ethnic communities:

- Latino - younger on average, generation gap in outlook
- African American - older on average, gap between established families/leaders and other African Americans
- Pacific Islander - younger on average, gap on immigration concerns
- Anglo - population increasing, more well-off, disproportionate share of leadership (mayor and city manager are both white)
- Asian and other – small communities, visible among small business owners/store managers

East Palo Alto: Some Recent History

Unincorporated until 1983, tax-producing land gobbled up by surrounding cities

Dramatic reduction in murders: 42 (highest rate in U.S.) in 1992; only 1 in 1999

Wave of commercial development in late 1990s brought jobs and tax money to the city, but also some displacement

Recent, well-reported scandals involving city officials reflect and contribute to an atmosphere of distrust

East Palo Alto: Resource Spike (1999-2002)

Tax base

City budget for 2001: ~\$13 million / year (\$440 per resident)

Big increase from \$4 million / year (1995)

Still low compared to neighboring Palo Alto (\$2150 per resident, 2001)

Externally funded community initiatives

Neighborhood Improvement Initiative (1999-??), \$1.25 million / year

Digital Village initiative (2000-2003), \$6 million total

Intense amount of community-based planning (“death by meetings”)

Many working groups, community forums, advisory boards

Less than 1% of population really involved: a few score of highly involved people go to most of the meetings

Key decisions made in face-to-face meetings, often little formal process (by-laws, agenda, minutes), generally no email list for group

E.P.A. Community Network – Stanford Collaboration (July 2001 -)

Community Network is part of Digital Village, includes Technology Access Points and a community web portal, EPA.Net, with online news, links, and forums

Service/community-based learning

Student participation funded by Stanford

Study areas

Language functionality and community demographics

Face-to-face community meetings

Online community experience

Community survey related to computer usage

Insider interviews

East Palo Alto: Hard Times Return (April 2002 -)

Hewlett Foundation withholds Neighborhood Improvement Initiative funds for FY 2002-2003, demanding the number of projects be reduced from 39 to 2-3, with clearer goals and evaluation criteria

Internal strife afflicts Digital Village advisory board and it ceases to meet

Budget shortfall hits City Government, due to loss of revenues from changed State vehicle license fee

City manager resigns in scandal, questions emerge about City use of funds

Silicon Valley is in recession – little money available to sustain programs without continuation funding

Our Thesis

- (1) Failure to invest in decision support has led to breakdowns in trust and effectiveness among groups implementing the community investment initiatives and in the City Government.
- (2) Given the environment in East Palo Alto, participatory community planning, involving a sufficiently broad base of residents could be done with the support of Internet-based communication to augment face-to-face decision making, but would be difficult or impossible to accomplish otherwise.
- (3) Social science research can play an important role in influencing the provision of funding for decision support technology, as a foundational component of grass-roots social change which is under-appreciated by sponsors and governments.

Process Failures and Their Consequences

1. An emphasis on face-to-face meetings for making important decisions in East Palo Alto disenfranchises residents and biases outcomes.
2. Insufficiently frequent communication hampers the ability of committee members, and the public, to participate in key decisions.
3. Lack of information about relevant external events leaves meeting participants unprepared for change.
4. Self-selection of participants leads to biased decision making in groups.
5. The use of streamlined procedures for making important decisions can lead to ineffective decisions and disillusionment.

Process Failures and their Consequences (continued)

6. Face-to-face meetings put decisions in a setting that may be information-poor relative to what is needed.
7. Face-to-face meetings are often accompanied by a lack of transparency.
8. Lack of adequate decision support makes it difficult to know when and where meetings are being held, even if they would otherwise be able to and interested in attending.
9. The defects of an emphasis on face-to-face meetings, and of a lack of decision support, are more damaging in a disadvantaged community like East Palo Alto than they would be in an advantaged group, because they amplify the distrust and despair that is already highly present in the disadvantaged community

Relationships to Other Literature

Community change initiatives (CCIs)

The Internet and social capital
Main effects versus directed research

Community electronic networks

Online deliberation

Digital divide, access, and participation

Ideas about Future Activities (2002-2003)

Immediate applications:

Use of the E.PA. Community Network to make meeting information available centrally, publicizing it, and measuring impact

Setting up an online forum in which city official answers residents' questions – one has expressed willingness

Next-generation application:

Development of a prototype tool for online asynchronous meetings