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Smaller campus favored

SAN PEDRO: L.A. Unified board shrinks size of proposed school near Angels Gate Park.

By Melissa Pamer, Staff Writer

For more than three years, plans to build a new high school in San Pedro have gone through a variety of permutations - and all have received plenty of opposition. Now officials think they have a winner in a new, smaller design.

The board of the Los Angeles Unified School District voted unanimously Tuesday to reduce the size of the high school proposed for an area near Angels Gate Park from 1,215 students to 810.

The 29-acre campus is set to be built on a former Army installation, part of which has been owned by LAUSD since 1979. The site would become an "annex" of nearby, overcrowded San Pedro High School.

The new school would house an expanded version of the 379-student marine science magnet program currently based at the larger campus. Advocates of the move said the magnet would work well with the site's existing uses - a marine mammal care center, a bird rescue facility and the district's Point Fermin Outdoor Education Center.

"We're talking about a magnet school, something that would be complementary to what is already there. Having a facility that's 1,215 or greater could impact those facilities," said David Kooper, chief of staff to school board member Richard Vladovic, the main proponent of the reduced-size plan.

Community members who turned out for the board vote said they supported the size reduction but remained generally opposed to plans to build on the site and to tinker with the existing high school.

"If it's not broke, don't fix it - and I think maybe San Pedro High School is one of those schools," San Pedro resident Chad Christian told the board.

The proposed site is currently occupied by Angels Gate Continuation High School, a day care, the Wilmington-San Pedro Skills Center and a few dozen old military buildings. Those structures will be relocated or demolished.

An environmental review of the building project, set to cost nearly \$103 million, began earlier this year. Final plans are expected to be approved by the school board in November, and construction is scheduled to be completed in time for the 2012-13 school year.

"We have time to do this right. We have time to make a well-thought-out, well-

planned decision," said Local District 8 Superintendent Linda Del Cueto, who has met with an informal community advisory group about the district's plans.

A new campus has been discussed for several years as a solution for overcrowding at 3,600-student San Pedro High School. At least three sites - and varying enrollment scenarios - have been proposed for the school.

In 2005, the district announced plans for a 2,025-student school on land in northwest San Pedro that a developer had bought for a massive residential community - the still-controversial Ponte Vista. The LAUSD plan was eventually dropped in the face of opposition from developer Robert Bisno, Councilwoman Janice Hahn and some area residents.

A site in Lomita was briefly considered last year until it, too, raised community ire.

Then, when Vladovic assumed his seat on the school board in July, he advocated a smaller school for the district's property at Fort MacArthur.

His predecessor on the board, Mike Lansing, congratulated Vladovic on the new plan this week, but said he was worried that the school's smaller size would not relieve overcrowding at the main campus.

"San Pedro High School is just way too large," said Lansing, who had backed the plan for the 2,025-student school on the Ponte Vista site. "If it is 810, they need to figure out a way to maximize those seats. If the marine magnet isn't big enough, they need to put something else there."

Roderick Hamilton, the development manager for the district's south region, said the new plan was both in response to community critics and to shifting demands at San Pedro High.

The district's move, he said, shows "a sensitivity to community concerns about having a school there, but it really is gearing our construction program to demonstrated need."

The 810 figure, he said, would put San Pedro High back at its "target planning capacity" of 3,150 students.

Despite the scaled-down size - and the synergy with existing facilities - some in San Pedro remain opposed to the district's plans.

On Tuesday, about a half-dozen members of NOISE, a local group opposed to the new school, waited through seven hours of the board's lengthy agenda to speak on the issue. Some said the focus should be on upgrading San Pedro High School's aged campus.

"We're going to spend \$100 million on 800 kids and leave 2,500 in the 100-year-old building?" asked Christian, a member of Neighbors Organized and Involved to Support Education.

NOISE members expressed concern about increased traffic, potential environmental contamination remaining from Army days and the fate of historic military structures on the site. They also were worried that the new school would be seen as "elite" in comparison to strongly spirited San Pedro High School.

Concerns about increased traffic would be addressed under the new plan, Kooper said, which would eliminate car use by busing students back and forth to the main campus. The fact that the school will remain a part of San Pedro High School - while relieving some overcrowding - should help address worries about creating a rival school, he said.

Additionally, the district plans to address concerns that residents have voiced about overuse of residential Alma Street - the most direct route between San Pedro High School and the proposed magnet site - by creating a new road on campus that would link to a city park access road leading to Gaffey Street, Roderick said.

"There are those who don't want Angels Gate touched at all. I understand their concerns. We're going to do what we can to mitigate," Kooper said.

A draft environmental review of the new school project is due in early August and will be followed by a 45-day public comment period.

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