

Daily Breeze Newspaper

Article Launched: 09/30/2008 10:50:22 PM PDT

Longtime automotive class at San Pedro Skills Center set to relocate

By Melissa Pamer, Staff Writer



Jose Vallejo assigns a task to automotive students at the San Pedro Skills Center, which is being partially closed to make room for a magnet school. (Sean Hiller/Staff Photographer)

When Jose Vallejo first saw the place where he would eventually teach auto repair to thousands of students, it was little more than a wooden shell.

The last in a forlorn row of faded old military buildings that make up the former Upper Reservation of the Army's Fort MacArthur, the makeshift classrooms had been used as a stable, Vallejo said.

Twenty-eight students were already enrolled in Vallejo's automotive emissions class - where they would be trained to become smog technicians and learn general auto repair - at the then-new San Pedro Skills Center.

All Vallejo needed was a place to teach them - a garage.

"When (we) opened the doors, pigeons flew out. It was empty. No running water, no running lights, nothing," he recalled.

Now, almost 30 years after many improvements have been made, there's still a desolate feel at the windy, weedy site. There's no heat in the shop and skunks have nested underneath Vallejo's office. When it rains outside, he said, it rains inside, too.

Nonetheless, it's a grease-stained home of sorts, with eight bays to work on cars and walls lined with tools. Photos and awards from students are posted everywhere.

Hundreds of Vallejo's graduates - from former gangbangers to bored retirees - have gone on to run their own smog shops or work for others doing emissions tests. It's one of the only programs in California that trains smog technicians. Local low-income residents benefit from the class,

as well, bringing in beat-up, old cars for cheap repairs by Vallejo's students.

But by the end of the year, Vallejo's beloved shop will be empty. Soon, it will be destroyed.

As the district moves forward with its controversial plans to build a new magnet high school on its 47-acre property near Angels Gate Park, a dozen of the existing buildings - including Vallejo's - will be razed to make room for the new school.

Vallejo doesn't want to go.

"They want the skills center to disappear, as far as I'm concerned," he said.

In December, Vallejo and his 47 students - who pay \$65 for six months of instruction - are scheduled to move to LAUSD's Harbor Occupational Center, at the opposite end of San Pedro.

One of 12 centers that make up the district's 400,000-student adult and career education division, "Harbor Occ," as it's known, is not where Vallejo wants to be.

He has already refused to relocate there once, several years ago, a stand he believes saved the skills center.

Now he said he's worried that he won't be able to offer low-cost repair to the community at the new location.

"I just want to be able to have the freedom to help people," he said.

That's a concern his customers share, too.

"They're saving my life. I'm low-income and there's not many programs like this," said Steven DeAnda, who so far has spent only \$20 on repairs he guessed would run him up to \$400 elsewhere.

San Pedro resident and activist Judy Cairns, who's been taking her car to Vallejo for more than 20 years, said she doesn't believe the class will survive at its new location.

"It's perfect up here," she said. "I'm concerned that (Vallejo) will get down there, but after one semester, that will be it."

She compared the skills center to the San Pedro Science Center, a run-down K-12 educational facility that has seen fluctuating levels of support from the district over four decades.

The San Pedro Skills Center, founded in 1978 so the district could fulfill its obligation to the federal government to make academic use of the former military site, had been vibrant in the 1990s, said Dominick Cistone, administrator of the district's adult education division.

There were hundreds of students - adults and high-schoolers - taking dozens of classes.

Then budget cuts forced a scaling back of the center, and now there are only four classes there.

Next year, two academic classes will remain on site, while Vallejo's course and an upholstery class will relocate to the 3,200-student center to the north.

District officials believe the new location - closer to public transportation and with a full complement of automotive classes that could attract Vallejo's students - will be better for the smog class.

And they insist Vallejo will still be able to offer low-cost services to residents at the new site, only with more supervision, district officials said.

"He's been there for years and now he's being asked to up and move. He's going to have to get used to the change," Cistone said.

Last week, Vallejo's shop was busy with visiting clients. One, a housekeeper at the nearby Early Education Center that will be razed and rebuilt elsewhere on the LAUSD site, was handed her alternator in a plastic bag with an address where she could buy a cheap replacement.

Meanwhile, student Fernando Soriano repeatedly poked his head into Vallejo's cluttered office, asking for repair advice.

A busboy in the afternoon and evenings, Soriano has been coming every morning for two years to learn from Vallejo.

"When you get practice, it's like they pay you," Soriano said.

By next year, he'll be ready to take the state emissions exam and be a licensed smog technician, he thinks.

"This is what I'm most proud of," Vallejo said. "They came here with no future."

He pointed to a faded photo - one of many on Vallejo's "proud wall" - of a man who walked into class not knowing how to change the oil on a car.

"Now he owns a big auto repair in Las Vegas," Vallejo said.