

School Plans Rile San Pedro Residents

By Megan Bagdonas

Depending on who you ask, South Region High School No. 15 is either the perfect solution to the overcrowding at San Pedro High School - or the worst problem facing the neighborhood.

After a failed attempt to put in a high school on the Ponte Vista condo project site, Los Angeles Unified School District turned its attention to port-area property already in its possession: 29 acres on the Fort MacArthur Upper Reservation.

"We want to build on the land that we own. It is going to be a great location for a school," said Rod Hamilton, LAUSD's regional development manager, about the \$89 million project.

However, residents living near the proposed site say a new 1,215-seat high school would be a scourge to their quiet suburban neighborhood.

"It's fine just the way it is," said resident Mary Frey, who worries the new school will bring gridlock, rabble-rousing kids and a loss of street parking.

Last month, the school district took its first steps toward compiling an environmental impact report by releasing the initial study and conducting a public scoping meeting - in which more than a hundred community members showed up to decry the school.

"Once they believed that the school could actually be put there, it was like lightning to a wildfire," said Doug Epperhart, member of the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council. "They have the money and they will be putting up yard signs, I don't know about bumper stickers yet."

No neighborhood council has taken an official position on the proposed school. But the Palisades Resident Association has.

"We oppose the high school as it is currently configured," said association President Terry Miller.

Miller and other residents have formed the community group NOISE, which once stood for Neighbors Opposed and Incorporated to Stop Encroachment but now has a softer tone: Neighbors Organized and Involved to Support Education.

Although the group claims to be empathetic to the district's desire to relieve overcrowding at San Pedro High School, it basically thinks the proposed school is a horrible idea.

The group ridicules LAUSD's policy of providing 22 parking spaces per classroom - which would amount to 113 spaces - as well as the initial study's proposal to use narrow Alma Street as the main access road to the school.

"You can't even have two cars pass each other on one stretch (of Alma Street)," said resident Yvonne Schueller, whose property abuts the school site. "And a large stretch of Alma Street at the proposed entrance of the school has no sidewalks, so it would be dangerous for walkers with all the added teenage drivers. It already is dangerous. One lady's garage has been crashed into 17 times."

While traffic and parking are on the top of NOISE's list of complaints, the group is also concerned about damage to the area's wildlife, poor air quality, possible soil contamination and the fate of the education programs currently residing at the site.

Construction of the new high school would require the demolition of some of the 40 buildings now occupying the site, which include Angel's Gate Continuation High School, a day-care center and the Wilmington-San Pedro Skills Center.

NOISE argues that it doesn't make sense to tear down what taxpayer money helped build. The group also is worried the school district will not be able to provide maintenance for the new school in the midst of its budget crisis, Schueller said.

But school officials say the most important thing right now is providing relief to overcrowded San Pedro High, which has about 3,600 students.

"San Pedro High is on the verge of going year-round," said school board member Richard Vladovic. "The bottom line is we need to relieve San Pedro High. Going multi-track would be detrimental to the educational programs of that school."

However, Vladovic favors an 800-seat school, which would provide a more personalized learning experience for students. Harbor-area Councilwoman Janice Hahn has also said she favors a smaller school at the site.

But the size and type of school - whether an academic-themed academy, ninth-grade academy, magnet school, or regular high school - will be decided in part by a subcommittee formed by local superintendent Linda del Cueto to study the school site.

Teachers at San Pedro High School have a mixed bag of opinions on the proposed school.

Some say whatever is built at the site will bring respite to the school's hectic crowds.

"It's hard for the students to get noticed on this campus unless they get in trouble, and I think that has everything to do with overcrowding," said English teacher Jacquie Bryant. "A lot of students are failing high school because they don't have (teachers and faculty) who really know them and who can check in on them."

Others are hesitant to get their hopes up. They say the district has been talking about building another high school in San Pedro for decades, but has yet to deliver.

Then there are those who doubt a new school would be successful.

"There is just so much history and tradition at our school and so many parents want their kids to go here for that reason alone," teacher Kathy Carcamo said. "I know I definitely would not send my daughter to a new high school."

The public comment period for the initial study ends May 7. The draft EIR, which will present alternative projects and solutions to negative impacts created by the project, is expected to be released this summer.

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