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School site 'clean' despite toxins

LAUSD: Study assesses soil at proposed campus on ex-Fort MacArthur land.

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Despite finding elevated levels of arsenic and lead in the soil, [Los Angeles](#) Unified School District officials said last week that the San Pedro site of a proposed new magnet high school is safe.

At a public hearing Wednesday at which LAUSD officials discussed an 8,400-page environmental report that was released two weeks earlier, consultants said that the toxins found at a 39-acre district-owned site on the Upper Reservation of the Army's former Fort MacArthur were comparatively benign.

"If you were to ask me if this site were contaminated - no," said Walt Grinyer, one of the district's environmental consultants with Geosyntec. "I've worked at a lot of military sites. Any base would take this site in a heartbeat compared to what they have."

Some area residents are fiercely critical of plans to build a campus that LAUSD officials have pitched as an effort to relieve overcrowding at the 3,600-student San Pedro High School, which is less than one mile away.

A number of the approximately 100 residents who turned out at the hearing were frustrated when they sought answers to questions that officials said were outside of the meeting's purview. But many are saving their criticism for an upcoming meeting where the focus will be on the school's design and impact on the surrounding residential neighborhood.

"All we're here to talk about and all that we know about is the dirt," said LAUSD's program manager Tom Watson.

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preliminary environmental assessment - which relied upon an analysis of more than 1,400 samples of soil and gases within the soil - is required by the [state Department](#) of Toxic Substances Control, which oversees the evaluation and cleanup of proposed school sites.

The assessment found elevated levels of lead, arsenic, pesticides, gases associated with wood preservatives, and compounds related to crude oil. Much of that contamination was attributed to old military buildings that are currently on the site.

At one location, lead was found at 12 times the safe level, but officials said that was likely due to peeling lead paint on the buildings. The highest concentration of arsenic found was 1.9 times the safe amount.

One woman at the meeting brought in a shallow container of dirt from the site - a "present," she said - that she urged officials to inhale so they would be aware of what neighbors would be breathing in during construction.

Some attendees said they were confused and frustrated by the voluminous scientific report.

"We looked through this PEA. It's massive, it's written technically. I don't think there's two people in this room who can figure it out. How bad is this? Nobody can decipher it from this report," said Stephen Yates, president of

the Palisades Residents Association, a group that represents homeowners and renters in the surrounding residential area.

"It's probably one of the cleanest military sites I've ever seen," Grinyer responded.

In certain areas, workers will remove and dispose of contaminated soil - a process that will also get a public hearing - before construction can begin. Further analysis will be conducted where elevated levels of toxins were found, but the site is clean enough for the district to move forward with its plans, officials said.

"If they were at levels that were dangerous, DTSC would have said, 'You need to shut it down,'" said Jacob Haik, deputy chief of staff to LAUSD board member Richard Vladovic, who represents the area.

For some residents, the district's assurances about the site's safety were almost beside the point. Though many are concerned about effects of the potential excavation and transportation of soil, it's the school itself they're more worried about.

Opponents say the school is inappropriate for the area, will bring increased traffic and noise, and could create an unnecessary rivalry with spirited San Pedro High.

Some at the meeting wore black T-shirts that read, "There is only one Pedro High."

The district's quest for a new high school in San Pedro has since 2005 produced several different plans - at several locations - that LAUSD rejected. A plan for a 1,215-seat school on the district's property near Angels Gate Park was originally approved by the Board of Education last year.

In June, the project was redefined at a board meeting as an 810-seat campus. District officials at that time said an expanded version of the 379-student marine science magnet program at San Pedro High School - and, potentially, the school's 120-student police academy magnet - would be moved to the new campus.

Since June, representatives of Vladovic have said attendance will be limited to 500. Vladovic, who lives in San Pedro, has been a strong proponent of the district's recent plan to move toward smaller schools.

The 500-student number means the campus may be less disruptive to the surrounding neighborhood. But critics have also questioned how much overcrowding relief the new school would provide to San Pedro High School, and whether 500 seats are worth the project's \$89 million budget.

"It is more expensive to build schools that are (for) 500 (students)," Vladovic's chief of staff David Kooper conceded.

Building the school for 810 students, Kooper said, would give the district flexibility to partner with a community college and LAUSD's own nearby Point Fermin Outdoor Education Center.

"We're trying to be as responsive as humanly possible to the community," said Kooper, who refers to the magnet school as an "annex" to San Pedro High. Of the PEA, Kooper said, "It's a clean site."

A broader review - the draft environmental impact report - was released late Friday, and will be the subject of a Sept. 4 community meeting.

The district's plans for removing contaminated soil from the site will be released in five to six months, and a public hearing will follow, LAUSD officials said.

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