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San Pedro's Two-Campus Divide

By Melissa Pamer Staff Writer



The nearly 3,500 students at San Pedro High jam the walkways as they make their way across campus between classes. District officials argue that a new magnet campus near Angels Gate Park would alleviate crowding, but opponents say money should be spent improving the original school. (Steve McCrank/Staff Photographer)

On the north end of San Pedro High School's aged campus, there's a village of squat "temporary" structures where the teeming overflow of students from the Depression-era main buildings take classes.

Almost two dozen bungalows, housing a total of 47 classrooms, are laid in a grid on a large plot of asphalt and dotted elsewhere throughout the school. The majority have been there for decades.

The small portables have created classroom space for a student body that this year numbers 3,442 - on a campus that was originally designed in 1935 for 1,700, according to district officials.

"We used to have open space, now we have bungalows everywhere," said social studies chair Aaron Bruhnke, who teaches history in the same classroom where his grandfather taught.

This semester, enrollment at San Pedro High is actually down 119 students from last year, in line with a districtwide trend that's expected to continue for several years until reversing itself by 2012, district officials said.

This year, on San Pedro High's comparatively small 23-acre campus, the current enrollment reduction doesn't make much of a difference.

"You don't feel 100," Principal Bob DiPietro said.

Conditions at the school are a hot topic this fall, as Los Angeles Unified board member Richard Vladovic and district officials pitch a controversial new annex campus nearby.

At the same time, they're backing Measure Q, the school district's \$7 billion bond measure that would repair existing schools. Voters will weigh in on the measure Tuesday.

Officials say the best way to address overcrowding at San Pedro High is to build a new \$102.5 million campus for the school's two magnet programs, and to approve a bond that would replace the school's bungalows with permanent structures and create new science labs.

"The density is too high there. When you look at San Pedro High School, in order to reduce density, you've got to remove kids," Vladovic said.

"When we built the new schools," he said, referring to dozens of new campuses erected in the last decade with previous LAUSD bond measures, "we created another inequity - the 'haves' in the new schools and the 'have nots.' The new bond is going to correct that inequity."

But a vocal group that has fought to stop the proposed annex campus isn't buying Vladovic's argument.

The opponents say the school district doesn't deserve another bond because it has been wasteful in its construction and modernization program - which is funded in part by \$13.6 billion from four bond measures that voters approved since 1997.

The group, which goes by the acronym NOISE, has taken up twin slogans: "Fix Pedro First" and "There is only one Pedro High."

"You don't need to do both," said NOISE member Chad Christian, referring to the bond measure and the new school. "You do one or the other. If you fix Pedro High School first, you don't need to spend \$100 million."

District officials say that without Measure Q, which is opposed by NOISE members, there will be no funding to replace the bungalows with permanent structures at the existing school, as the bonds would do.

And without the new campus, which is slated for a Dec. 9 vote before the Board of Education, conditions at San Pedro High will remain overcrowded, officials say.

According to district demographers, school enrollment will start to climb again in coming years, and by 2012 San Pedro High may have 3,670 students - enough to send it into multitrack, year-round instruction, a fate that's been avoided so far.

Vladovic says he's doing everything he can to prevent that dreaded outcome. His critics call the threat of year-round schooling a scare tactic.

On campus, the experience of overcrowding is very real - especially to 17 teachers for whom the school cannot provide classrooms.

Chris Nagle, who has taught biology at the school for the better part of four decades, is one of those teachers. This year, he volunteered to be a "traveling" teacher to help the science department with its classroom shortage.

Each morning, he loads a rolling cart with microscopes and lab materials and moves it to class. At the end of class, he loads it up again and takes it to the next room.

"It's really made my life miserable," Nagle said. "For 34 years, I had everything exactly where I wanted it. Now it's helter-skelter."

Much of this kind of crowding began when the school integrated ninth-graders in 1995, adding nearly 1,000 students to the campus as part of the district's shift to a ninth- through 12 th-grade high school model.

"That year was insane," Bruhnke recalled. "We had people teaching in libraries and cafeterias."

Traveling teachers are the worst symptom of overcrowding on campus, DiPietro said. But there's also the crush in the common areas, he points out.

At lunch and nutrition break, lines snake out of a packed cafeteria where a red sign on the wall announces a maximum occupancy of 250.

In two outdoor courtyards, almost every available seating surface is taken by students. Swarms of teenagers make their way in and out of narrow doorways in the historic buildings.

NOISE members have suggested having two lunch periods, or building another cafeteria. They'd also like to see the bungalows increased to two stories to create additional classroom space.

But there's little open space on the cluttered campus.

The district has already allotted almost \$44 million for improvements at the school since the first LAUSD bond measure 11 years ago. That's more than any other LAUSD high school in the South Bay or Harbor Area has received. (Narbonne High in Harbor City was a close second, but most other campuses received much less than San Pedro High.)

San Pedro's new \$13 million gym is set to open in December. Some critics grumble that a classroom building could have been placed there instead.

Regardless, existing conditions need some major changes, both DiPietro and Vladovic said.

"This is really a 19th century model," DiPietro said of the large campus.

New theories of education embrace personalization - and much smaller schools, which were the subject of a Vladovic-backed board resolution in June to reduce most schools' size to 500 students by 2020.

"To say, 'Fix Pedro First,' when you're also saying keep it at 3,500 - you're really swimming against the tide of education," DiPietro said.

Despite an unmistakable undercurrent of NIMBYism that fuels some of the opposition to the proposed new campus, there is a very real sentiment that the annex is a threat to the proud traditions at San Pedro High.

The campus would be built on 28 acres of former Army land at Fort MacArthur that was transferred to the district in 1979, adjacent the Palisades neighborhood and about one mile from the existing campus.

The Palisades Residents Association has announced opposition to the project, as has the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council. Traffic, noise and environmental concerns top the list of complaints.

But the main issue raised by a broad swath of teachers, students, alumni and NOISE members - even some in favor of the project - has been questions about the effect the new campus would have on the existing high school.

"It could divide the community," said Art Almeida, a local historian and 1947 graduate of the school, which opened originally in 1903 on Gaffey Street.

"It's just the fact that you want to build another high school that will take away from San Pedro High School. It's been around for over 100 years. A lot of people in this community identify with San Pedro High," Almeida said.

Vladovic stresses that the new school will be a true annex, a vision that he said he's pushed since running for office last year. But some doubt how tied the two campuses would be.

"Basically, you will be segregating (the students)," said Teri Sardisco, an alumna and mother of three Pedro graduates.

"For socialization purposes, I don't think it's appropriate. It would make it hard for after-school stuff."

Initially proposed for 1,215 students, the project was reduced to 810 seats by the Board of Education last summer. Since then, Vladovic has backed the idea of a 500-student school that would house the marine science and police academy magnet programs from San Pedro High.

Two-thirds of the current 469 students in those programs are from outside of San Pedro High's attendance area, according to the school's magnet coordinator. The students are bused to San Pedro's 15th Street campus, along with special education students, each morning.

Out-of-area students are from Bell, South Los Angeles, Huntington Park and other southern parts of LAUSD, said school magnet coordinator Sandy Martin-Alvarenga, who added that she has regularly received inquiries about magnet student demographics since debate over the annex campus has heated up.

The makeup of the magnet student body has led NOISE to question why the district is building a school that would largely cater to non-Pedro kids in San Pedro.

"We feel that San Pedro is often the dumping ground of everybody else," said Yvonne Schueller, a NOISE member and Pedro graduate.

Because the magnets are 70 percent minority, per district guidelines, Vladovic contends that there's an element of racial discrimination to some opponents' statements on the proposed campus.

"If one more person from NOISE says 'those kids,' I will never forget it. Most of the bused-in kids happen to be kids of color," Vladovic said.

"If I sound vitriolic, it's because they're all my kids."

But Chad Christian of NOISE denied that race had anything to do with the group's opposition to the school.

"San Pedro is vastly a minority community, so why would we oppose a largely minority magnet school? - That's never been the issue," Christian said.

If the board approves an environmental report next month and the California Coastal Commission gives its permission in January, the school still wouldn't open until 2012.

And the fate of Measure Q improvements - few of which were detailed in the bond language - remain in the hands of voters.

Meanwhile, future enrollment at San Pedro High could be affected by increased interest in Port of Los Angeles High School, the 3-year-old charter in downtown San Pedro. And another charter operator has plans to pursue opening a new high school in San Pedro.

"It's not a small town anymore," said 79-year-old Almeida, a lifelong San Pedran. "We always constantly have to accommodate the growth. And too many times it impacts the community that has been here for a long time."