

# Defending San Pedro's Ft. MacArthur



Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times

Joe Janesic, a founding member of the Ft. MacArthur Museum, is dedicated to preserving every relic on the fort grounds. It's "unimaginable" to him that any of the property's historic buildings would be demolished.

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The Los Angeles school district's plan to raze buildings at the historic military site to build a new school doesn't sit well with some.

By Corina Knoll

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When the bulldozers come to Ft. MacArthur next spring, Joe Janesic will take it personally.

For more than two decades, the 40-year-old has been a mainstay of the historic military site in San Pedro that was built in 1914 and served as an Army post until 1974. He organizes events, conducts tours, handles media and even restores vintage phones -- all as a volunteer. A founding member of the Ft. MacArthur Museum, he has dedicated his life to preserving every relic on the grounds.

"The buildings here were unique because of the time they were built and the methods they used -- old construction techniques that don't exist anymore," Janesic said excitedly one rainy Sunday as he pointed to a map outlining the area. "The look, feel and smell of the tactile structures -- you can't reproduce that."

So if one day the row of beige military barracks where Army reserves once slept is mowed over, if the dilapidated mess hall where tens of thousands of soldiers once ate is destroyed, if the Quonset hut that housed olive drab trucks and jeeps is demolished -- Janesic will be just as devastated as the buildings.

"It's an image I don't ever want to face," he said. "It's unimaginable."

The Los Angeles Unified School District has plans for the land, which it has owned since 1979 when the military turned it over to the school system for educational use. The district plans to raze the structures for what is referred to as South Region High School No. 15. The 47 acres may soon be a 128,000-square-foot annex to [San Pedro High School](#) that will include the marine science and police academy magnets.

An environmental report on the site is expected to be presented to the school board Dec. 9, and preparations for the \$1.2-million project are to begin in April, said Roderick Hamilton, a district development manager. Construction is scheduled to finish before the 2012 school year.

Sandy Martin-Alvarenga, magnet coordinator at San Pedro High, said she would be happy to move her 500 students to a spacious campus where they will benefit from being neighbors with a marine mammal care center and an oiled-bird facility, and have ample room for class projects. San Pedro High is so crowded, she said, that several teachers do not have permanent classrooms and must move from room to room.

"Some of the arguments have been to fix San Pedro High first, but even if you put in more classrooms, it doesn't take away the number of kids on the campus," Martin-Alvarenga said.

A small school already exists within the ghost town of battered buildings at Ft. MacArthur. Amid the broken windows, chipped paint and sagging fire escapes are classrooms of the San Pedro Skills Center. Providing daily adult-education courses for the last 30 years, the center enrolls about 120 students and is best known for its smog certification classes. Students are accustomed to working under an open sky with views of the Pacific Ocean on a clear day.

Classes there will end in December and will be absorbed by the nearby Harbor Occupational Center, where enrollment is about 2,500. Students, angry about the move, say the district used the skills center to fulfill the education clause in its land grant and is now coldly tossing it aside.

"The San Pedro Skills Center is not important to L.A. Unified anymore," said Gabriel Sanchez, 34, a student there. "What we're encountering is discrimination against adult education."

Sanchez and his wife, Marcia, became automotive technicians 12 years ago after taking courses at the center. They have returned every two years for semester-long classes that allow them to renew their smog certification licenses.

The couple, along with many other students, fear that a move to Harbor Occupational will mean crowded classes and a less tranquil environment, with students there to fulfill a

GED requirement instead of seeking higher education.

"It's never going to be the same at Harbor, never, ever," said Jose Vallejo, 57, who has been the Skills Center's automotive instructor for 25 years. "The injustice of the whole thing is, the center saved the land from the feds. The district, after 30 years, is disposing of the center like it's a piece of trash."

Dominick Cistone, programs administrator of the district's adult and career education division, said the core mission of the district is to serve the K-12 population. After the high school is built, he said, there is a chance the Skills Center would return, but classes would be available only on nights and weekends.

"I can understand their passion. They've been going there for years," Cistone said. "They have a sense of ownership. But the reality is that property belongs to the school district, and the school district requested they vacate it to build a needed high school."

Janesic is in favor of keeping the Skills Center at Ft. MacArthur, especially because its presence required some district maintenance. It's possible the barracks could be relocated for preservation, but Janesic said no official agreement has been made, and he worried that they would eventually crumble from neglect.

"The fact that the school district doesn't see the value in these buildings really bothers me more than anything else," he said.

The museum is on land owned by the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, so it is safe from demolition. Most of its weekend visitors linger inside, reading captions under black-and-white photos of warplanes or asking questions of volunteers dressed in vintage military fatigues.

Those who cross the road and onto L.A. Unified's territory marvel over the remains of what was once a thriving military post.

"When you're in high school reading history books, it's boring," said Rick Callender, 37, a graphic designer visiting from Silver Spring, Md. "Then you come to a place like this and you get a sense of what it was like. It comes alive. When you lose this, you never get it back."

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