

Marymount dorm plan dealt a blow

By Melissa Pamer Staff Writer

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Marymount College officials are recalculating their controversial pitch to build dormitories on the school's Rancho Palos Verdes campus after city commissioners this week dealt a major setback to the plans.

In a series of complicated votes addressing specific elements of the college's proposal, the city Planning Commission signaled its approval for most of the expansion plans - minus the dorms and with modifications to a proposed athletic center.

The two-year private Catholic college is pursuing a variation of a proposal first brought to the city in 2000. It wants to build two residence halls that would house 250 students, a large athletic center, a refurbished library and other improvements at its property on Palos Verdes Drive East.

The commission on Tuesday directed city staff to draft resolutions approving permit applications for most of those elements - but not for the dorms, which Marymount officials see as crucial.

"We have mixed feelings," college President Michael Brophy said Wednesday.

A final vote on the permits and on a broader environmental report on the project is set for May 26.

Many homeowners in the residential area surrounding the campus oppose the plans - and have disputed the college's claims of widespread support from a telephone poll and recent door-knocking campaign.

One vocal opposition group celebrated the commission's votes, which were in question before Tuesday's meeting.

"We're pleased," said Lois Karp, head of Concerned Citizens Coalition/Marymount Expansion, which recently hired an attorney in its bid to scale back the project. "It looks like there will not be dorms, and if that is the truth, we'll be happy."

The actions came near the end of a months long string of contentious public meetings during which commissioners' support for Marymount's plans seemed to wax and wane. The results reflected a "straw poll" taken in December that showed commissioner misgivings about the residence halls.

Chairman Jeff Lewis said he would stick by his statement in December that the dorms would adversely impact neighbors by putting the campus in use "24/7." He said he endorsed an alternative developed by the opposition group CCC/ME and offered in a city environmental report - having the college build dorms at its property down the hill in San Pedro.

"In my view the split-campus alternative is feasible and superior, and for that reason I can't approve the project as presented," Lewis said.

On Tuesday, the commissioners needed to make specific findings that would allow them to grant four planning permits that the college needs to move ahead. A complicated checklist from city staff asked commissioners whether each element of the expansion plan met certain criteria.

Items ranged from big questions - whether residence halls would lead to adverse effects on neighboring homes - to smaller concerns, including whether a parking lot should be allowed farther from the dorms than city code permits.

Commissioner Bill Gerstner supported the college's plans through many of the votes, and frequently had the backing of David Tomblin. Lewis and Jim Knight mostly stuck together by opposing the more controversial elements, resulting in a split 2-2 vote on some findings. In those instances, Lewis asked staff to bring back resolutions in May anyway.

The panel's three other members recused themselves.

At the commission's direction, the athletic center will have to be moved back 10 feet from a slope and lowered in height by up to 10 feet so it won't block a neighbor's view of Catalina Island.

On Wednesday, Brophy expressed concern about the athletic center changes, although he said the college was flexible on the height. He said he remained frustrated that a plan floated by the concerned citizens group for a "living campus/academic campus" alternative - with new dorms being built on the college's former Navy land on Palos Verdes Drive North in San Pedro - had been taken by the city as a serious option.

The college had hoped to build faculty housing there after the dorms were complete, Brophy said.

"We don't understand where they think they have the right to tell us what to do with property in another municipality," he said.

Brophy wouldn't say if the college plans to appeal to the City Council or file a lawsuit if dorms are denied, saying "all options" were being considered.

School officials' chief concern is the fate of the residence halls at next month's meeting, he said.

"We're just really focused on making our case to them in May and hopefully having them change their minds about one of the most important parts of the project," Brophy said.

melissa.pamer@dailybreeze.com