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San Pedro high school campus is tabled; Lomita becomes a possibility

LAUSD had sought a new high school at the Ponte Vista development but now says it's exploring other options.

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The Los Angeles Unified School District has quietly shelved a plan for a public high school in San Pedro, a move that staves off a nasty legal fight with an influential developer.

Rather - if funds become available - the district could build an academy-style school in Lomita, which has emerged as the leading option among several other locations.

The San Pedro property along Western Avenue has failed to gain the support of board member Richard Vladovic, who represents the San Pedro-to-Watts area.

"You never know with some bureaucrats," Vladovic said. "They're going to have to peel me off the road if they do it. It's not the right thing."

Instead of seizing 6 acres slated for Bisno's sprawling Ponte Vista housing project on Western Avenue, the district could accept comparable acreage in the northeastern area of Lomita Park for the school.

Lomita City Councilman Barry Waite, with the blessing of his colleagues, offered the land to the district's facilities division this summer.

Lomita hasn't had a public high school since the early 1960s, when the LAUSD moved Narbonne High from a school site now used as Fleming Middle School to Harbor City.

An 810-seat school sitting on about one-fourth of Lomita Park - plus 4 adjacent acres - would accommodate the city's approximately 800 high-school-age residents, Waite said.

"We don't want our Lomita high (school) in San Pedro," Waite said. "We need a high school in Lomita."

Waite, whose son Alex is a 10th-grader at the marine science magnet at San Pedro High, said the city is waiting for LAUSD's response to its plan.

Under the Lomita plan - endorsed 4-1 by the City Council in August - 2 acres of the park and 4 acres that serve city and county maintenance yards would be turned over to LAUSD in exchange for funds earmarked for parkland elsewhere in town.

Councilwoman Margaret Estrada cast the lone dissenting vote.

The city would develop a joint-use agreement with the district allowing city residents to use the school's gymnasium after school and on weekends.

In the spring, a city-funded phone poll showed 3-to-1 support for the school. The city paid Orange County consultant Townsend and Associates \$10,000 for the work, Waite said.

In January, Lomita set up an exploratory committee to develop a charter elementary school. But Waite said city officials are satisfied with the academic programs at Fleming Middle School, Eshelman Elementary School and Lomita Math Science Magnet.

Lomita residents often complain about the test scores and safety at Narbonne High School, Waite said.

"They don't like Narbonne High," he said. "There's a perception that it's not a particularly safe campus. Overall, it's not quality."

Even with Vladovic's opposition, Los Angeles Unified's facilities division is keeping its analysis under wraps.

Roderick Hamilton, a regional development manager, acknowledged he's considering four to five alternative sites, even though Ponte Vista is still the preferred location.

A second site is located on Sepulveda Boulevard in Harbor Gateway.

"We'll look at alternatives," Hamilton said. "We're just not prepared to discuss things we're exploring until we have explored them."

In one of his final votes, in late May, Vladovic's predecessor, Mike Lansing, supported an 810-seat school at the Western Avenue site.

Bisno's refusal to sell that land has pitted the district against the developer. The district would need to seize it from him via a court process known as eminent domain.

By taking the land from an unwilling seller, the district may have to pay for the "highest and best use" of the site to Bisno, who has proposed 1,950 homes.

"The cost would be huge," he said.

Councilwoman Janice Hahn also opposes the high school on that site, particularly since Mary Star of the Sea High and Rolling Hills Prep have both recently built new campuses in the immediate vicinity. A third school, Hahn said, would push traffic to the breaking point.

"Western Avenue has never been a good fit for the proposed LAUSD high school," Hahn said. "With two other high schools in the vicinity, the roads in the area just can't handle that type of traffic."

Building a high school in Lomita still faces financial hurdles, since bond money earmarked for the earlier project would instead be used for projects elsewhere in the district.

LAUSD's \$19.3 billion school modernization and construction plan is at least \$2 billion short of the amount needed to build all projects promised to voters, which could delay the Lomita high school.

"There are other projects that will probably take up most of the money," Vladovic said.

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