

School district finalizes construction plans

by David Rosenfeld

Published June 17, 2004

The School Board of Trustees has finalized its plans for a new gym on the Hermosa Valley School campus in the midst of repeated complaints from local residents about expected parking congestion and claims that the district hadn't adequately prepared for expansion.

The revised plans, which cut out two proposed classrooms, a conference room and 500 square feet off the library brought the project down to its scheduled \$6.6 million budget. Funds for the building and other school construction and modernization projects come from the \$13.6 million Measure J bond that voters passed last November and a \$1.9 million bond from the statewide Proposition 55 passed in March.

With the project seemingly finalized, including a gym that will most likely serve more than school purposes, the argument has shifted to one of Hermosa's favorite topics: parking.

Some local residents complained that after-school use of the gym by sports leagues and other assemblies would create disastrous parking problems in the already heavily impacted neighborhoods.

"Whenever they have any type of event our neighborhood is impacted," said resident Jerry Compton. "We have been impacted for years and really haven't complained until now. We really don't want to buck these guys. I don't see any way the quality of the education for our kids is going to be better when they get done with this."

A major fear to resident activists is a massive assembly of people in the gymnasium, which could possibly hold more than 2,000 people. The campus currently has 68 parking spots. Board members during a meeting four weeks ago seemed content to not modify the current parking lot, as a way to save costs. Each additional space costs roughly \$10,000, officials said.

Under the city's guidelines, a building used for assemblies would require one parking spot per 50 square feet.

The gym, at 7,400 square feet, would require an additional 80 spots. However, the school district is not subject to city building codes. Neither the state board of education or the Coastal Commission – the school being within the coastal zone – has any guidelines for parking other than requiring two spots per teaching station. A gym counts only as two teaching stations.

Hermosa school board member Greg Breen suggested other parking options such as the parking garage and lot next to nearby Albertson's grocery store, as well as the soon-to-be-created Hermosa Pavilion a block to the north on Pacific Coast Highway.

Planning for expansion

Some residents also told board members they felt the district was missing the boat on the need for more classrooms. According to an assessment two years ago, the school was projected to need four additional classrooms within about the next 10 years.

Under the current plan, after construction and the elimination of the portable classrooms, the school would net two additional teaching stations not including the gymnasium. If physical education is taught strictly in the gym and does not occupy two of the classes currently earmarked as a weight and dance room, the school would in fact net the four additional teaching stations called for in the assessment. Architect Brian Dougherty designed the rooms for such a purpose.

Dougherty also left space to build three more class spaces in the future.

Times have changed

Throughout years of discussing desires for a gymnasium for Hermosa Valley P.E. classes, most every stone has been turned over and most issues have been raised more than once. One such argument that continues to come up repeatedly is a proposal to buy and retrofit the Community Center on Pier Avenue, the former site of Pier Avenue School from the 1940s until 1977. Created by President Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, the

building has a gym and multiple classrooms.

In the late 1970s the district had a much different outlook than it does today. Enrollment dropped like a rock and district officials quickly negotiated the sell-off of different campuses including the North School at Myrtle Avenue and 25th Street, and South School at the current South Park. In 1978, with about 700 students in the district, Pier Avenue School was sold to the city for \$650,000.

Some residents at the latest school board meeting again raised the issue of buying back the property just as the board finally appeared to conclude its plans. Some who accused the district of never considering the idea plan to ask officials to undertake an official study of the Community Center and determine the cost of re-converting it to school use.

School board trustee Lance Widman, who was mayor at the time of the 1978 sale, said it's an idea that's time has passed.

"The delay has cost us three classrooms. I think it's a plot to delay the project until it's not possible. There's not a chance," he said.

According to district officials, board members, consultants and the lead architect, the idea to buy and remodel the Community Center was considered fully and found not to be economically sound.

"The cost would mean eliminating school needs," said board president Linda Beck.

Whether voters and the city would have approved a notion to use about \$15 million to turn the Community Center back into a school -- and whether it could be done for that amount -- is anyone's guess. No formal study has been done, though Dougherty said he looked at the possibility closely.

Dougherty said classrooms would have to be enlarged according to code, asbestos removed, an elevator installed and a handicap ramp created in the back. On top of that, changes would prove extremely difficult because of the stout building construction. It might be more cost effective to tear it down and start over, Dougherty said.

"Whoever built the Pier Avenue School must have built the Maginot Line," Widman said. ER

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