

Oversight chairman: gym is in jeopardy

by Robb Fulcher

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Educators will have to scrap plans to build a gymnasium at Hermosa Valley School unless they can negotiate a minefield of deadlines, including hiring a construction contractor by July 24, said an official charged with overseeing school bond spending.

"I think the point of no return is coming pretty soon," Sam Abrams, chairman of a committee overseeing Hermosa's ongoing school bond expenditures, said Friday.

Plans for the gymnasium building – which would also hold four classrooms and a library – have been plagued by rising construction costs that have hampered school building across the state, and by a legal challenge from neighbors of the K-8 school on Valley Drive.

Now, Abrams said, the gym project is being squeezed between the school district's tight money and the necessity to meet tight deadlines for the project that, if missed, would make the project more expensive and even harder to fund.

His committee learned last week that revenues from voter-approved construction bonds fall \$2.6 million short of funding the \$7.6 million building. A previous estimate by a consultant had the project \$1.3 million short, but the new figure is based on written bids submitted by construction contractors who want to do the job.

"This is based on the bids, so we're talking about real numbers," Abrams said.

To keep the gym project alive, Abrams said, educators probably must:

- Hire a construction contractor by July 24, when the contractors' current bids for the gym project expire. After that the prices offered by the contractors would no longer apply, and another time-consuming round of bidding would only drive the prices higher.
- Fill in the \$2.6 million shortfall using money from other sources, such as \$1.3 million in reserves, \$200,000 in fees charged to commercial developers in Hermosa, \$200,000 that educators hope to get from refinancing some of the school bonds, and as much as \$1.5 that educators hope to get from a special state fund for school construction.
- Get California Coastal Commission approval for the gym building within the next few weeks as well. The approval is required because a small western portion of the building would stand within the "coastal zone" regulated by the state.

In the long run, educators also must win or settle the neighbors' lawsuit to allow the gym project to go ahead. In a somewhat foggy side note, the lawsuit does not seek a temporary halt to construction while the matter is thrashed out in court, so construction can begin even before the lawsuit is resolved.

"It's a crazy time," Abrams said.

Drop-dead date?

Abrams said if the July 24 hiring deadline is not met, higher construction costs might preclude the gym being built.

Asked if she considered July 24 a drop-dead date for the gym project, school district Superintendent Sharon McClain did not say yes, and she did not say no.

"The trouble with answering that question is, if we went back out to bid on that project we don't know what [prices] we would get," she said. McClain added that the school district is "really trying" to meet the July 24 deadline.

She said she believes construction costs will continue to rise. Angela Jones, the school district's business manager, said construction costs have gone from about \$215 per square foot in March 2003 to about \$400 per square foot now.

In addition, a timely start to construction would allow as much work as possible during the dry summer, before rainy days cause further delays and drive up prices, educators said.

“Summer construction is key right now, before the rainy season,” Jones said.

McClain added that excavation for the building would leave “a big pile of dirt” that would pose more of an inconvenience after summer, when the full complement of students returns to classes.

In what could be seen as a sign of confidence in the gym project, the school district has sold three portable buildings to make way for the gym building. The district sold the portables, all older buildings, to the Redondo Union School District for the cost of having them moved.

Abrams raised the possibility that delays of weeks or months could lead to a redesigning of the project by architects, which would send the project back to square one, requiring another year or so of public hearings and regulatory clearances.

“If they redesign it without the gym and have to wait a year and do it again, the way prices are going up, it would probably end up costing about the same to build it a year later without the gym,” Abrams said.

McClain also said an architectural redesign would delay the project by about another year.

Legal question

The lawsuit seeking to block the gym portion of the project, filed by the 28-member Committee for Responsible School Expansion, claims in part that the gym cannot legally be built because it was not among the construction projects listed on the Hermosa school bond measure that voters approved in November 2002.

School board members have countered that the gym was mentioned in ballot arguments for and against the bond measure, and the gym project was frequently discussed at school board meetings, in local newspapers and in the election campaign for the bond measure.

Abrams said his committee, which oversees the legal propriety of the bond expenditures, wants an attorney to tell them whether bond money can be spent to build a gym.

If the lawsuit is not settled, McClain said, the committee will get its answer when attorneys for the school district file their written arguments with the court. If a settlement is reached, McClain said, the district would avoid the expense of having the legal arguments prepared.

In an effort to reach a settlement district officials and school neighbors have held one mediation meeting and plan at least one more.

The school district started 2003 with \$13.6 million in the local voter-approved bonds and an additional \$2 million in state bonds for the construction and for an overhaul of plumbing, electricity, safety features, handicapped access, heating, air conditioning and technology-lab features at Valley School and the K-2 Hermosa View School. Most of the money was spent on the upgrades, which cost more than expected because of the rising construction costs.

The 26,000 square-foot gym building, as planned, would stand 34 feet tall near the southwest corner of the campus on Valley Drive. ER

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