

Residents question Hermosa Beach school bond measure



North School's 25th Street entrance. Resident opposition to an upcoming school bond has focused on the decision to rebuild the school. Photo by Ryan McDonald

BY RYAN MCDONALD

With a bond measure to alleviate crowding in Hermosa Beach schools set for next month's election, a group of residents is raising doubts about the wisdom of the \$59 million construction plan.

Opponents of Measure S, which will come before voters on June 7, mostly concede that the district is experiencing a facilities crunch. But they argue that the solutions the measure pursues are wasteful, and would potentially create more problems than they solve.

Such arguments have gained traction among city voters before. In November 2014, Hermosa voters rejected Measure Q, a facilities bond that sought \$54 million for capital outlays. The measure fell 32 votes below the state-mandated margin of 55 percent for school bonds. Restore Hermosa Schools, an organization which led the fight against Measure Q, is now working to defeat Measure S.

Opposition centers around plans for North School, which sits west of Valley Park. The location is owned by the district and previously served as a school site, but was closed in 1987, when district-wide enrollment dipped below 700 students. (It now exceeds 1,400). The facility is currently being leased for use by two preschools and South Bay Adult School.

Under Measure S, North School would be rebuilt, with preliminary cost estimates ranging between \$28 million and \$33 million. The district arrived at this option after commissioning a Long Range Facilities Master Plan, which examined options to "modernize" or to "rebuild" the school.

Opponents of Measure S argue that the district has given insufficient attention to the "modernize" option. Resident Cassandra Bates said that school districts both locally and across the country are increasingly refurbishing their old buildings rather than tearing them down, generating savings that could be reinvested in classroom technology.

HBCSD, she said, has focused singlemindedly on the rebuild.

"We're just looking for financial accountability — that we truly are getting the most cost effective solution," Bates said.

Superintendent Pat Escalante said that the rebuilding option was the result of “a great deal of consideration.” She said that it was the failure of Measure Q that caused the rebuild aspect bond measure to take its current form.

“Had measure Q passed we wouldn’t be here,” Escalante said.

Measure Q contained a combination rebuilding and modernization plan. A public opinion survey done in the wake of the 2014 loss indicated that voters’ chief reason for opposing the measure was concern over Valley Park. In order not to impact the beloved park, Escalante said, the district moved its parking back onto the school site, which necessitated the rebuilding plan.

Opponents are also concerned about the historic nature of North School. They discovered that an architect of North School was Samuel Lunden, designer of notable Southern California buildings including as the Pacific Stock Exchange in downtown Los Angeles, and the Doheny Memorial Library at USC. Bates said it would be a shame, and potentially a poor investment, to get rid of such a structure, noting that the Torrance Unified School earns money through film permits at Torrance High.”

“If we take a little bit of time, invest a little bit, it could become a revenue generator,” she said. “It could become a prize possession.”

Escalante said the district would present a historical resource assessment of the structure at the May 11th school board meeting.

Traffic around North School is another area of concern. Resident Jackie Tagliaferro pointed out that the streets surrounding North are narrow and disconnected from main traffic arteries. Given Hermosa’s small size, she said, opening the school could affect the entire town.

“We’re only one square mile,” Tagliaferro said. “This one decision has a huge impact on the whole community as a whole.”

If reopened, North would serve the district’s population of third and fourth graders. The age group was chosen in hopes that some of the students would walk or bike to campus, lessening the traffic burden. Opponents of measure S note that two streets coming from the east, 24th Place and 25th Street, both have significant gaps in sidewalk coverage, potentially endangering students who are not driven by their parents.

The district has commissioned a traffic study for the area, with results to be released at the May 11th meeting. Backers of Measure S have previously argued that there should be little change in traffic, because the total number of students now using the campus — about 300 — is similar to the projected total of third and fourth graders.

Resident Blair Smith, who lives across the street from the school site, is skeptical. Smith said pre-school programs feature pick-ups and drop-offs throughout the day, while school traffic will be more concentrated.

“They say it used to be 300, it’s 300 now, and it will be 300 when it opens. But these other 300 aren’t all coming at 8:00 [a.m.] and leaving at 3:30 [p.m.],” Smith said.

Children’s Journey, the larger of the two preschool programs on the campus, offers programs opening as early as 6:30 a.m. and running as late a 6 p.m. said director Elaine Wikrama. Some parents enrolled in Children’s Journey have expressed concern to Wikrama about the fate of the program. Wikrama said that 90 percent of the kids the preschool serves are Hermosa residents.

Escalante said she plans to meet with the city and the preschool to discuss options. But ultimately, ongoing crowding limits the district’s choices.

“We want to support them, but not at the expense of a very valuable asset,” Escalante said. “We were saving this for a rainy day, and the rainy day has come. In fact, the rainy day has been here for over four years.”