

Los Gatos Union School District board approves \$300,000 geological work at Lexington site

Judy Peterson, Bay Area News Group, 10-25-11

Aerial photos that were taken in 1931 are apparently one of the reasons that construction of a new Lexington Elementary School is being held up. That's what Los Gatos Union School District assistant superintendent Leslie Paulides told a packed house of parents when they gathered at Fisher Middle School on Oct. 18 to hear the latest developments in the school controversy.

Paulides, who is a number cruncher by trade, has been getting a fast lesson in geology. "The photos do show a new landslide that is not evident in later photos because Highway 17 was built," Paulides said.

The California Geological Survey is demanding that more geologic work be done on the Lexington site to ensure that it is stable. That work is expected to cost about \$300,000.

So the district's board of trustees had to decide whether to fund that work. But they were also faced with the question of whether it would delay the project and, if so, would the school's price tag increase even more? The new school was originally estimated to cost \$18 million, but the cost has already increased to \$21 million.

Parent Alyce Green encouraged trustees to fund the additional seismic work. "This community school is the vital thread that holds our community together," she said.

Adam Bates, who has three children at Lexington, said they are envious when they see the other more modern schools in the district. "I tell them, 'Your turn will come,'" Bates said.

Other Lexington parents argued that mountain residents were promised a remodeled or new school 10 years ago. "In 2001 you made a promise to the community to build a school on par with the other schools," Raf Strudley said. "Please support the children and the community and fulfill your promise."

Although a show of hands demonstrated that the majority of the audience was made up of Lexington supporters, not everyone at the meeting supported spending more money on Lexington. One man suggested that the school district purchase the old county courthouse on Knowles Avenue, which is for sale for approximately \$9 million, and convert it into a school. Still others argued that Van Meter, Daves Avenue and Blossom Hill Elementary schools are getting dangerously overcrowded and the cost of a new Lexington is too high since it will serve a maximum of 240 students.

Lexington's current enrollment is 171. The other elementary schools' current enrollment ranges from about 550 students to 640-plus.

Escalating enrollments at downtown schools aside, trustees still worried about the potential for Lexington's costs to escalate even higher. "The thing I struggle with is, when is too much too much?" board president Doug Halbert asked.

Trustee Scott Broomfield said, "My heart says go to Lexington, but my head is telling me, 'You don't really have a plan that solves the problem.' We need to step back and do a good master plan that addresses the problem."

The overcrowding problem in downtown schools is expected to worsen if the town of Los Gatos continues to approve new housing developments. To that end, Halbert said he and superintendent Diana Abbati will be meeting soon with Mayor Joe Pirzynski to discuss the issue.

The trustees' decision was also complicated by the fact that performing the additional seismic work at Lexington does not guarantee the California Geological Survey's approval.

"We believe the faulting will be a non-issue," geotechnical engineer Michael Kleames said. Pressed further, he admitted there is probably a "70 percent chance of success" with the CGS.

After nearly five hours of debate, the board of trustees took the middle road: it unanimously approved the \$300,000 for the additional geologic work, but if it triggers any construction schedule changes or cost increases, it will reconsider whether to continue moving forward.

Simultaneously, the district will embark on an aggressive facilities master plan aimed at finding solutions to the overcrowding in downtown schools.