

Lexington Elementary School is in danger, not from quake but from CGS

Judy Peterson, Bay Area News Group, 4-17-12

It appears that Lexington Elementary School's days are numbered. The California Geological Survey wants more information on the stability of the site where a new Lexington was scheduled to be constructed, but the district's board of trustees say they're done spending money on Lexington. The district has spent about \$4 million on plans for the new school.

CGS sent a letter to the district on March 28 that said, "The engineering and seismology issues at this site are not adequately addressed in the referenced report." The "referenced report" was completed earlier this year after CGS requested more information on the site and the district spent about \$280,000 to gain CGS approval for construction of the new school.

The board discussed the issue at its April 10 meeting.

"The unfortunate aspect of that [CGS letter] is we're not sure we can come back with a positive outcome," consultant Mike Kleames said. "It's unlikely we can say this is a doable project. CGS is being ultra-conservative."

Kleames said CGS has changed the rules in the middle of the game. For one thing, the district's initial analysis was based on the stability of the building site in a 7.35 earthquake. Now CGS wants the building to withstand an 8.0 shaker. "The general sense we get is CGS is very negative about the site," Kleames said.

It's estimated that doing more seismic work could cost anywhere from \$25,000 to \$75,000.

"I want to urge you to go ahead with the seismic work," Lexington parent Heidi Lewis said. "It would be a shame for the school not to be built in the mountains."

Parent Alex Chapman agreed. "Please proceed with the geologic work," he said. "Let's rebuild Lexington at a larger capacity to address enrollment."

The current Lexington School has about 170 students. The new school would accommodate 240 students. Enrollment at other elementary schools in the district exceeds 500 students per school and is expected to continue to grow as new housing developments in town come online.

Board member Chris Miller expressed annoyance with the CGS. "I'm really torn," Miller said. "I just don't know how viable a site it is. I'm worried about going down a path that might not succeed."

That sentiment was echoed by board member Scott Broomfield. "There's a part of me that looks at this as being incredibly unfair," Broomfield said. "Even if we could get a 'yes,' I don't see getting to a yes without incremental costs."

The estimated cost of a new school has risen from approximately \$18 million to \$21 million before a spadeful of dirt has even been turned.

Another board member called the CGS request for more seismic work "distressing" and accused CGS of holding the district hostage. "I would like nothing more than to see this school built," Tina Orsi-Hartigan said. "I'm worried if we go down this path--if we ever get a yes--it will be with so many caveats that it will shrink the school to the point where it's not worth building."

"I'm devastated that I have to agree with my peers," board president Kathleen Bays said. "I don't see any way that we're going to get to a place where we're going to get approval for a school."

Trustee Doug Halbert said, "My worry is that the CGS will continue to raise the bar and force us to make the decision to say no." Halbert, in fact, made the motion to discontinue making any further investment in the Lexington property, other than \$5,000 to send a delegation to Sacramento to find out why CGS is so opposed to the building site.

Since the property is owned by the district, trustees want to know what it can be used for if a school isn't built.

The decision to stop all work at Lexington was unanimous.

But there was another fly in the ointment, as trustees grappled with whether to abandon the current Lexington school and send kids to Fisher Middle School next fall. Since Fisher would have absorbed Lexington students during the construction period, those plans are pretty much already in place.

Although assistant superintendent Leslie Paulides said, "The students are not in danger today," trustees worried that keeping kids at Lexington might pose a liability issue. They are expected to decide next month if the current Lexington School will be closed at the end of this school year.