

San Diego Union-Tribune

Fallbrook Residents fight Bonsall High School site

By Deborah Sullivan Brennan, Contact Reporter, March 9, 2017.

FALLBROOK, CA: After failing to pass a bond measure to pay for a new high school, the Bonsall Unified School District is pressing ahead with plans for the campus anyway, igniting a backlash from residents who don't like the proposed site.

The school board approved a request for proposals for the school Thursday night, setting the ball rolling to select a contractor through a funding mechanism called a "lease-leaseback" agreement. Under that plan, it would lease the land to a developer, who would build the campus, and in turn lease it back to the district.

Bonsall Superintendent Justin Cunningham said the district has built two elementary schools and district offices using the method, which allows school officials to place a guaranteed cap on construction costs, and to choose a contractor that offers the best value, not merely the lowest bid.

In a 2015 lawsuit involving the Fresno Unified School District, however, lease-leaseback arrangements came under fire for improperly limiting competition. As a result, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a law in October tightening the rules for their use. Moreover, Bonsall voters rejected a \$58 million bond measure for the project in November, so the district still needs to identify how it would make lease payments under such an agreement.

Where they will build the campus also remains uncertain.

Residents of Gird Valley, the Fallbrook community where the campus is slated for construction, complain that the location poses safety problems and won't house enough students for the growing community. Although the 50-acre parcel the district owns on Gird Road, off State Route 76, has long been eyed for school, residents have rejected multiple bond measures to fund construction there. The district convened a site selection committee that's evaluating alternatives, but so far, the Gird Valley site is still the top option.

"We're looking at other possibilities that might come forward, but so far, Gird Road appears to be the strongest site," said school board member Tim Coen.

As things stand now, the district's high school students share a campus with Sullivan Middle School on West Lilac Road. The high school is based on an educational system called New Tech, that combines interdisciplinary lessons and project-based learning to help students develop skills they'll need for future jobs.



At the proposed site, March 10, with Monserate Hill in the background.
Photo: Peter Kunasz

Cunningham said the school will eventually need to move to its own campus to accommodate increased enrollment as Bonsall grows following the recent widening of State Route 76. The 50-acre Gird Road property is their first choice, he said.

Opponents say that site has limited access, is in a community of older residents, and has sensitive ecological conditions. They argue that only about half the site is usable for construction, and that won't be enough to accommodate the 1,500 high school students expected in the future. Instead, they favor building the new high school on land adjacent to the middle school, or closer to Interstate-15.

"Ideally it should be located in a central place within Bonsall Unified School district, that would be skewed to where future development will happen," said Peter Kunasz, a Gird Valley resident who has organized neighbors to fight high school construction in their community.

At least two school board members are sympathetic to their concerns. Dick Olson and Sylvia Tucker said they favor seeking land elsewhere for the new campus.

"I am 1,000 percent against it being at the Gird Road site," Olson said, "If we take on the community we will never get a bond passed. And without the bond, we can't build anything."

The debate over the high school location is one of the growing pains for the rural community. Tucked into valleys south of Fallbrook, Bonsall is laced with country roads that wind through ranchettes, nurseries and orchards. Since the widening of State Route 76, more housing developments have cropped up, and others are on the way in the I-15 corridor, bringing new families and students with them.

Planning for the new arrivals has become a top priority for the school district, and a concern for Gird Valley residents, who last year fended off a proposed housing subdivision at the shuttered Fallbrook Golf Course. Instead, that site will be developed as a vineyard, a use that residents said is more in keeping with the community's rural character.

They would like to see the school board find a different site for the high school, and sell the Gird Road property as a mitigation bank, noting that 16.4 acres of the parcel was identified as critical habitat for endangered arroyo toad.

"When you compared Gird Valley to San Francisco, Los Angeles or Orange County, it's all trees and green," said resident Teresa Platt, who opposes the plan. "We're constantly fighting to hold onto a little piece of heaven."

This story was updated to reflect the fact that the proposed site for Bonsall High School falls within the community of Fallbrook.

<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/communities/north-county/sd-no-bonsall-high-20170309-story.html>