

Pasadena Star-News

PUSD looks to close 3 schools

Plan will help bridge \$9.2 million deficit

By Gretchen Hoffman

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Friday, May 27, 2005 - PASADENA -- To cut costs, the Pasadena Unified School District Board of Education has zeroed in on Linda Vista and San Rafael elementary schools in Pasadena and Altadena's Loma Alta Elementary School as the top candidates for closure.

Officials want to close at least three schools over the summer, at least temporarily, to help bridge a \$9.2 million budget deficit, and board members narrowed the list to six schools late Thursday. The board named three other elementary schools, Field in Pasadena and Burbank and Noyes in Altadena, as less likely candidates. Officials said they will consider closing more than three schools if the district's budget crunch worsens.

"It's not a school closure issue, it is what is the future of this district,' board member Bill Bibbiani said Friday. "We need to see this change as an opportunity to look at our staffing patterns, our busing patterns and truly rightsize this district."

The board hasn't yet considered several key factors, including the actual savings generated by each closure or how transportation costs would be affected, but the majority of the seven-member board is leaning toward closing Linda Vista, San Rafael and Loma Alta.

Trustees have backed away from earlier discussions about closing Washington Middle School. Parents, students and teachers have held rallies and packed meetings over the past few weeks since Washington was mentioned as a possible candidate.

Instead, board members now say they would like to find ways to increase the number of students at Washington rather than shutting it down, so more electives could be offered.

The PUSD needs to cut \$9.2 million from its nearly \$200 million spending plan by June 30. Closing three elementary schools would save an estimated \$1 million, but about \$2.7 million in cuts still must be identified. Closing a middle school the size of Washington would save an estimated \$1 million to \$1.4 million, officials said.

District officials have repeatedly stressed that the closures would be temporary, but that they expect to close another one or two campuses next year. In addition to state budget cuts, the district has been steadily losing students. State funding is based on average daily attendance.

Parents said they need more advance notice than they are being given to plan for their children's education. Others criticized what they see as too many cuts that affect the classroom and not enough at district headquarters.

For most of the board members, the density of students in a school's immediate neighborhood is one of the most important factors in selecting schools for closure.

San Rafael and Linda Vista, both in affluent west Pasadena, have few students from the surrounding area because most of the children there attend private schools.

"I will not vote to close a neighborhood school," Bibbiani said. He said he wants to look at staffing and busing patterns, including a switch from west-to-east busing to north-to-south routes to reduce the length of bus trips.

Most of the students at the three campuses are bused from other areas. Only 22 San Rafael students live in the adjacent neighborhood, and 200 are bused from Northwest Pasadena. At Loma Alta, all but 91 of the 376 students are bused from the Northwest.

At Linda Vista, 20 of the 417 students are from the neighborhood.

But many west Pasadena residents consider each campus an essential community asset even if the students aren't from the immediate neighborhood. Michael Hurley, president of the Linda Vista-Annandale Association, called on board members Thursday to open the campus as planned in 2006. Linda Vista students are currently being housed at the Audubon campus in Altadena because Measure Y modernization construction was to begin at Linda Vista this year.

"To shut it down is not acceptable," Hurley said.

Loma Alta is about a mile from Edison Elementary, which could potentially allow some students to continue to walk to school if Loma Alta is closed.

Board members said standardized test scores are also a consideration, but one that's further down the list. Of the six campuses being considered for closure, Burbank, Loma Alta and San Rafael rank in the bottom 30 percent of elementary schools in the state on standardized tests. Field and Linda Vista performed better than half the elementary schools in the state, and Noyes outperformed 60 percent.

Three PUSD schools not on the list for potential closure rank in the bottom 10 percent in the state, and three others rank in the bottom 20 percent.

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