

Berkeley Unified School District Columbus School's Fate To Be Determined Today

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Berkeley - Public Schools - Buildings

By JoAnn Mar

All directors on the Berkeley Board of Education say they are prepared to vote in favor of rebuilding Cragmont Elementary School, located in the northeast hills.

"I realize there are risks involved with this action," said Board Director Pedro Noguera, "At the same time, there was a promise made to this community when that school closed."

Cragmont was closed following the Loma Prieta earthquake, after the district's consulting engineers found seismic safety problems in the building's structure. Up until recently, the Office of State Architects had withheld approval for rebuilding on the site. The state gave its approval last year, after consulting engineers found that the Cragmont site could be safely rebuilt.

Since then, parents from the Cragmont area have lobbied intensively for the school to be rebuilt. In light of the Berkeley school district's recent financial problems, board directors have hesitated on making an immediate decision on Cragmont. If budget problems continue, the board may have to consider closing one or two schools in the future as a way of saving money.

The board voted to table the issue of reopening Cragmont until its July 13th meeting. At that

time, School Superintendent LaVoneia Steele will present her recommendation to the board.

"It's a sizeable amount of money to build a school in that location," said Board Vice-President Irene Hegarty, "It's a little more costly than were it on flat ground. And enrollment projections in the future are speculative."

The \$9.5 million needed to rebuild Cragmont will come from the Measure A facilities bond measure passed by Berkeley voters in 1992. At the time Measure A passed, the state had not yet given the go-ahead to rebuild Cragmont. As a result, funding for Cragmont was not specifically included in the measure.

Director for Capital Projects Arturo Taboada said that funding for non K-12 sites would be reduced in order to accommodate Cragmont. However, parents from other parts of the city have complained that rebuilding Cragmont will mean less money for their school sites.

South Berkeley parent Ken White told the board, "If [you] spread the money around so thin that the money doesn't make an impact and that we have average or worse than average schools, the people will perceive that the school district is something they don't want to

send their kids to and they will leave."

Last Wednesday, the school board told parents from Columbus Elementary in northwest Berkeley that the architectural plans they submitted for rebuilding their site were too costly and would have to be called back. The plan utilizes 55,000 square feet and includes space for science lab, pre-school and social services facilities, and teachers' offices.

The total cost for demolition and rebuilding would be \$1 million. Capital Projects Director Taboada said that only \$8 million has been budgeted for Columbus.

Columbus parent Kristel Prentice told the board that \$8 million would not be enough to make the site attractive. "The neighborhood feels 'do it right or don't do it at all.' It has to be an excellent school," she said "That means giving it some extra resources and that's what the board promised."

The Columbus site committee, the architects, and Capital Projects Director Taboada will meet to revise the plan. The committee hopes that the board will approve the architectural plans for Columbus before its summer recess so that work can begin as soon as possible.

