

Cragmont School rebuilding should bring back pupils

Berkeley - Public Schools -
By Shannon Morgan *Building BERK VO*

After years of debate and pressure from northeast Berkeley parents and residents, the Berkeley Board of Education voted unanimously last week to rebuild Cragmont School.

The elementary school was closed after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake damaged the main building. Since then it has been unclear whether the state would allow rebuilding on the site, which lies in close proximity to the Hayward fault.

After receiving geotechnical reports certifying a portion of the campus seismically safe and hearing from hundreds of parents committed to the school's reopening, board members finally committed to rebuilding at the site Wednesday.

With \$9.5 million needed to do so, it will cost \$1 million more to rebuild Cragmont than is budgeted for Thousand Oaks or Columbus (both slated for \$8.5 million reconstruction budgets) because a stronger foundation to resist earthquakes is needed for the site.

Director Pedro Noguera pointed out, however, that "it was promised by this board and administra-

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tion that that site would be rebuilt if it were feasible to do so. It's true this is a risk to the general fund"

He added that reopening the school is crucial to keeping middle class students in the district.

"We are excited to begin marketing all of the schools in the zoned choice system, which we believe will invigorate school programs throughout Berkeley and add hundreds of new students to the district," said Cindy Larson, chair of the Cragmont Site Committee.

The board was initially scheduled to decide the matter the previous week, but delayed action pending a recommendation from Superintendent LaVoneia Steele.

Steele, however, would not recommend rebuilding the school without attaching several caveats, including a provision that two or three smaller schools would have to be closed in a year if enrollment levels were low at all district schools. She named Oxford, John Muir and Emerson as possible candidates for

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closure.

Board directors quickly vetoed the condition as premature.

"I don't think there is a vote on this board to close schools, but even so I don't think it's the job of this board currently to do that," Board President Elizabeth Shaughnessy said.

Board members accepted Steele's remaining conditions that adequate funds be set aside "now" to ensure resources for transforming Longfellow into middle schools, that East Campus be guaranteed a permanent school building and that all newly constructed schools be built for a 450-student capacity.

"After considering all of the input received, data and reports completed, as well as considering my professional responsibility as an educator, I cannot recommend that Cragmont School be rebuilt with no strings attached," Steele said.

While board members agreed with the remaining three conditions, no discussion about where additional funds for Longfellow or where a new site for

East Campus might be found took place.

Instead, Noguera centered on his belief that rebuilding Cragmont, though a risk, is a necessary venture.

"I would rather gamble on expansion rather than taking a more conservative approach and end up with a district totally not viable because the only people left are the people who can't escape," he said.

Addressing the concern by some that spending more than \$9 million to rebuild Cragmont will result in a reduction of reconstruction funds for other schools, Director Pamela Doolan said additional state funds resulting from the rebuilding will help offset the cost.

"I like to think we are not taking money away from any other community or school with the augmentation of \$15 million in modernization funds," she said.

The board will vote to authorize a search for an architectural firm to develop construction plans when it reconvenes after summer recess.