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Parkside School \$8.8 Million Short; City May Help Pay

By Carol Dimmick

Supervisor Leland Yee made the cash-strapped San Francisco Unified School District an offer it may find hard to refuse: City resources to help rebuild Parkside Elementary School.

Yee, whose district includes the Sunset school, made the announcement at a May 23 meeting of the school district's Building, Grounds and Services Committee after delivering a blistering attack on the district for failing to keep its promise to voters who passed a \$90 million school bond measure in 1997 that earmarked funds for rebuilding the school.

"We cannot wait any more for the school district to keep their promise. I have spoken with the mayor and the Department of Public Works and they all agreed to work together in a partnership with the school district to make city resources available," Yee told school board members Eddie Chin, Mary Hernandez and Mark Sanchez.

Yee was followed by Harlan Kelly, deputy director of engineering for the SF Department of Public Works, who told committee members he was ready to put the department's entire staff of 600 at the disposal of the school district to build the school.

"We are ready to assist you in anyway possible, even to find funds," Kelly said.

Kelly said his department has an experienced staff that includes eight teams of architects and 10 teams of construction managers with expertise in infrastructure building and the rolling out of bond programs. He also said the department has the financial structure in place to effectively manage the project.

"There are a lot of things we do efficiently that could be explored," Kelly said.

Strong Neighborhood Support for City's Offer

About 30 Sunset District residents, many of whom worked with the school district's architect to develop the original plan for rebuilding Parkside, attended the meeting to show their support for the City's offer. The school has been closed since 1989 when it sustained major damage during the Loma Prieta Earthquake.

"I am thrilled to hear Supervisor Yee offer the services of the city to get Parkside school built. We have had a lot of meetings, a lot of promises, but we still do not have a school. It's time to accept offers of help," said Nancy Wuerfel, president of Parkside 4 Kids, an organization formed to fight a proposal by the school district to build housing on the playground of the school.

Since last summer a well-organized group of neighbors has been a thorn in the school district's side after they rallied to defeat an eleventh-hour proposal by the school board to build 43 units of subsidized teacher housing on the school's playground.

A second skirmish between school officials and neighbors came when the district canceled a planned child care center, a popular component of the project, because of soaring construction costs.

Yee Flexes Political Muscle With Offer

Yee's announcement could signal round two of a political skirmish that has been heating up since last month's heated exchange between the supervisor and school board President Jill Wynns at a Neighborhood Services and Parks Committee meeting.

Although her initial response to Yee's offer was noncommittal, Wynns made it clear she was taking the high road after their last dustup.

"The city is a vendor like any other and should be considered," Wynns said.

Wynns' carefully measured response was in sharp contrast to the frontal attack she launched at the May 15 meeting Yee called to get school officials to respond to a troubling audit recently released by the accounting firm of Arthur Andersen.

At the meeting Wynns not only refused to let the district's staff appear to

answer questions, but she called Yee's hearing a "media circus."

Yee responded that he found it troubling that Wynns had taken it upon herself to stop the staff from appearing since it was coming "hat-in-hand" to ask for \$2.5 million from the City.

The excoriating Andersen audit found the district had misused \$30 million in school bond funds and could not account for \$15 million in state construction and modernization funds.

In May, Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, on the advice of the city attorney's office, called the FBI in to investigate whether district employees improperly obtained a \$50 million federal grant and mishandled a \$32 million energy-savings contract.

Tab For Parkside Climbs To \$16 Million

Just how much it will cost to build the new elementary school, to be named after Sen. Diane Feinstein, has always been a bone of contention between neighbors and school officials. Supporters of the project say they were given a series of conflicting figures by school officials over the last several years.

According to school district documents prepared for the 1997 bond measure, the original estimate to rebuild Parkside was \$11 million. By April 1998, after the voters passed the bond measure, the facilities department's master schedule budgeted the same project at \$7.7 million.

By April 1999 school officials were warning that the price tag on the project could climb as high as \$17.5 million. Finally, last fall the district said it would cost \$16 million to rebuild the school without the child care center.

At the May 23 school board meeting, Chairman Eddie Chin said that even if total costs for the school were to remain at \$16 million, the school district had only \$7.2 million remaining of Prop. A bond funds to build the school.

Although the district has applied for state funding for the project, Chin said it is unlikely these funds will be available because the school district is low on the state's ranking list to receive funds.

Chin asked Deputy City Attorney David Campos, who advises the school

district on legal matters, to look into any legal issues involving a partnership before the committee makes a recommendation on the city's offer to Ackerman.

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