

Los Angeles Times

Valley Neighbors Blast Plans for High Schools

Residents say an L.A. Unified proposal to convert two shuttered campuses into 'academies' will spawn traffic, other problems.

By Karima A. Haynes
Times Staff Writer

July 18, 2003

Los Angeles school officials didn't expect much resistance when they introduced a plan to reopen three shuttered public schools as so-called academies in the west San Fernando Valley.

They viewed the conversion to academies — where students would focus on specific disciplines — as a less expensive alternative to buying land and building campuses to ease crowding.

Under the officials' proposal, Oso Avenue Elementary in Woodland Hills would reopen as a 400-student high school, and Hesby Street Elementary in Encino would become a K-8 campus for 530 students. Both would focus on art and design.

The third school, Hughes Middle School in Woodland Hills, would be turned into a 1,600-student international trade and business magnet high school, with 80% of students being bused from across the city.

But the proposal to convert two campuses into high schools has triggered a furor among neighborhood residents. They say the campuses would draw rowdy teenagers who would bring traffic, noise, parking problems, drugs, graffiti and vandalism into their quiet communities.

Citizen outrage got a full airing at a neighborhood council meeting Wednesday night in Woodland Hills. Opponents vehemently challenged the plan pitched in a slide presentation by Los Angeles Unified School District Supt. Roy Romer and Board of

Education member Marlene Canter, who represents the West Valley.

School officials say the district must find 8,500 new high school seats by September 2004 and another 7,200 by September 2005. Oso and Hughes would provide 2,000 of those seats.

Without the new high schools in the Valley, district officials said, students could face multitrack year-round calendars, larger class sizes, continued involuntary busing, more portable bungalows and more teachers traveling between classrooms.

Officials say the school-conversion plan is more palatable than taking residential property by eminent domain, a procedure that allows the government to force an owner to sell property for its fair-market value. To build two high schools that would allow enrollments equal to those at Hughes and Oso, 170 to 690 families and businesses could be forced to relocate.

But critics contend that the proposal is a "quick and cheap" solution to crowded high schools at the expense of neighborhood safety, parking and traffic. They say teenagers racing cars through residential streets would diminish home values and the quality of life.

Leading the charge against the Hughes proposal is No On Hughes, a group of neighbors who want to see the campus continue as an adult learning center, where mature students take parenting, computer, English as a second language and high school equivalency classes.

"This entire high school project is ill-conceived and demonstrates the LAUSD's complete lack of stewardship of Los Angeles community tax dollars," said Michael Holm, a Hughes neighbor.

Opposition to the school-conversion plan was organized in March when the school board directed its staff to study reopening closed schools under Measure K, which was approved by voters in November to provide \$3.3 billion for as many as 120 new campuses. In April, the board authorized staff to study the cost and impact of reopening Hughes, Hesby and Oso.

On Tuesday, the school board is expected to consider an amendment to add the three school-conversion projects to its January 2003 Strategic Execution Plan for New Construction, which would authorize continued funding for environmental analyses. The board is not expected to give final approval of the projects at the session.