

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Posted on Fri, Feb. 11, 2005

Charter school demands new home

By Shirley Dang
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Hundreds of parents, students and staff from Richmond's only charter high school stormed the West Contra Costa school board meeting Wednesday night to demand a safer, larger home.

Waving orange signs that read "Students 1st," the crowd from Leadership Public Schools-Richmond pointed to soon-to-be-vacated Seaview Elementary School as an ideal location.

"We could do great things with this school," said history teacher Lawrence Mullin. "If you give us this space, we'll put it to good use."

The five-member school board approved a plan that moves staff development offices to the San Pablo elementary school from the seismically unfit El Portal site.

However, board members told the boisterous Leadership crowd -- which held a pizza party outside after the vote -- that the district would seek a more suitable location for the charter campus in the future.

"I would like very much for you to see a home," said board member Karen Pfeifer. "I'm afraid this year, at this time, it's not Seaview."

By state law, districts must provide facilities for charter schools. West Contra Costa has two.

Currently, the 230 Leadership students split their time between the decrepit Gompers campus and portables across the street.

Because of the peculiar layout, students must cross the street five times a day to attend classes, which poses a serious safety issue, said Principal Brian Greenberg. And the building can't squeeze in another 150 students expected in fall.

"Our current facility simply will not house us," Greenberg said.

Sophomore Amanda Wyatt, 15, said test scores were improving and that the board should support the accomplishment by opening the elementary school's doors to Leadership.

"We deserve Seaview," Wyatt said.

Board member Karen Leong Fenton said she too wanted a better facility for Leadership, which is often seen as a "stepchild" because it is a charter school.

But she argued that Seaview is not centrally located, and would be hard to reach by public transit.

The district could potentially erect a building for Leadership in the coming years, said board member Dave Brown. Proposition 55 gave the state \$300 million to build charter facilities.

"It would be a long-term solution. It won't happen overnight," Brown said.

However, he said, "these are our kids. I feel like it's critical to support them fully."

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