The San Diego school district has selected a 4.8-acre parcel it will acquire in City Heights for a new elementary school, but trustees left open the possibility of purchasing more land for the site.

The school, which has not been named, will relieve crowding at Jackson and Marshall elementary schools and is expected to open in 2006. It will accommodate as many as 900 students.

The $43.5 million project will be paid for with proceeds from Proposition MM, a $1.5 billion bond measure approved by voters in 1998 for construction of 13 schools and repairs to 161 schools.

District staff considered several larger parcels but recommended the scaled-down site because it would cost less and require the relocation of fewer residents.

The site isn't large enough to allow playing fields. Because the property is adjacent to Colina del Sol Community Park, school officials believe they can reach an agreement with the city to allow the school to use the park during school hours for its recreational needs.

Even trustees who voted for the site said they were concerned about its size. The district has chosen sites of about 6.5 acres for most of its Prop. MM elementary schools. The Herbert Ibarra Elementary School site, also in City Heights, is larger than 8 acres.

"I don't like the idea of the smallest school to date in our MM work going into the most crowded, poorest neighborhood of the city," said Trustee Frances O'Neill Zimmerman. "Somehow that does not seem right, and it wouldn't fly in other communities, and it worries me that we make that recommendation."

The school will displace an estimated 526 residents and require the demolition of four single-family homes and 151 apartment units, according to a staff report. Included in the project cost is $24.4 million to acquire the property.

The boundaries of the site are Polk Avenue on the south, 52nd Street on the east, and Altadena Street on the west. The north boundary leaves intact several lots just south of Orange Avenue.

The school board voted 4-1 to accept the recommended site, but asked its staff to look at acquiring more property south of Polk. The board plans to revisit the issue next.
Trustee John de Beck opposed the motion. De Beck said he wanted the board to delay the vote until it had more information on alternatives.

District staff initially preferred an 8-acre site -- three of its boundaries were the same as the scaled-back site, while its northern border extended to Orange Avenue -- but that would have displaced 827 residents and required the demolition of six homes and 238 apartment units. The cost of acquiring the land and building the school was estimated at $60 million.

Members of the City Heights Area Planning Committee instead asked the district to buy a parcel along University Avenue. That potential site was ruled out by district staff members because of possible soil contamination caused by leaking underground storage tanks, and because it is near an earthquake fault line.

After the meeting, committee Chairman Michael Sprague said he doubts the district will expand the site because acquiring more land will be too expensive.

"Literally school sites last a century," he said. "I think it's sad. What they want to aim for is 100 kids an acre. And what they just voted for is 200 kids an acre."

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