Relief isn't on site yet: Teachers, students at crowded schools keep waiting for new construction
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Author: David Washburn

Fourth- and fifth-graders enrolled at Jackson Elementary don’t attend classes at the school. There isn't enough room.

Built for 600 students, the City Heights school enrolls more than 1,000. So the older kids go down the street to an annex at Horace Mann Middle School.

At Horace Mann, which has its own problems with crowding, the Jackson students learn music in a hallway, borrow library books from a converted classroom open only on Wednesdays and have recess on a tiny patch of blacktop.

"We have been living like this for eight years," said Susan Fahey, who works at Jackson as a parent representative. "It makes things very difficult."

Fahey and her colleagues at Jackson thought their school would be made whole this fall with the opening of a new neighborhood school.

But the new school has been delayed three years.

It is among 13 new schools promised under the San Diego Unified School District's $1.5 billion Proposition MM bond program, designed to ease crowding at more than two dozen elementary schools.

Four new schools were originally scheduled to open this September. The district has yet to break ground on any.

"It's disappointing to have to tell parents, 'Yeah, there is a new school coming, but we don't know when,' " said Bill Bailey, a vice principal at Jackson.

The disappointment is not limited to City Heights.

The communities of Golden Hill, Lincoln Park, Logan Heights, Mira Mesa, Normal Heights, Scripps Ranch and Sherman Heights, where many existing schools are hundreds of students over capacity, also will wait at least two years longer for their new schools.

Superintendent Alan Bersin and school board members acknowledge that, while the district did a masterful job selling Proposition MM to voters, administrators were ill-prepared to handle the massive bond measure once it was approved.
District planners, who had never handled a bond issue larger than $215 million, felt compelled to propose ambitious construction schedules to show the public they were moving ahead. But those schedules didn't allow enough time for community involvement, environmental reviews and negotiations with residents whose homes lay within the footprint of the new schools.

Those delays cost the district more than good will in neighborhoods waiting for relief from crowded schools. There was a financial cost as well.

Because the district did not begin acquiring land for the schools until 2001 -- three years after the bond measure passed -- and will purchase most of the land this year, it is buying property after real estate prices in the city have soared.

Median home prices in those areas have gone up between 55 percent and 100 percent since 2001.

"I regret the delay," said Bersin, who concedes school officials rushed to get started on Proposition MM-financed work "without having the ability to do it."

Also in the years since voters approved Proposition MM, construction costs have gone up more quickly than the district anticipated. In 1999, planners were estimating $150 per square foot in construction costs for new schools. The estimate today is closer to $200 per square foot, thanks in large part to unanticipated increases in labor and insurance costs.

Earlier this year, based on the high land costs and increases in construction costs, the district outlined possible cuts of up to $201 million -- or more than 40 percent -- of the $508 million portion of Proposition MM devoted to new school construction.

Lou Smith, a retired admiral hired in late 2000 to administer the struggling program, scrapped the original construction schedule in March 2001.

"They badly miscalculated the time it takes to plan and build a school in an urban district," Smith said of those initial plans.

While the bricks-and-mortar part of building a school takes only a year or so, community outreach, design and environmental studies can take more than five years, Smith said.

The process has become even more drawn out since Proposition MM passed, thanks in large part to the Los Angeles Unified School District's attempt in the late 1990s to build a high school on an abandoned oil field. The state began requiring additional environmental studies from school districts after that.

Some say that even with the added requirements, the new schools would be further along had Bersin realized more quickly that his staff was not up to the task.
"Alan fought us for a while," said Gil Johnson, chairman of the citizens oversight committee that monitors the bond program.

"I don't think he understood the magnitude of the program. He thought it could be handled by people already in place."

School Board President Ron Ottinger agrees with Johnson, saying Bersin's desire to show faith in his troops slowed progress in the early going.

"It was a huge economic cost and political cost, because we got behind," Ottinger said.

Bersin holds himself accountable for the early problems but argues that Smith, or someone like him, would have been brought in sooner had the board been quicker to authorize a competitive salary and bonus package.

Smith earns $175,000 per year with the opportunity to collect more than $60,000 in annual incentive bonuses.

Regardless of who takes the blame, mismanagement is only half the story. The other half is the huge run-up in San Diego real estate prices.

The district's estimate for land and relocation costs in the late 1990s was about $2 million an acre. Now those projected costs range from $3 million to $4 million an acre in many cases.

Consider the school planned for Normal Heights to relieve crowding at Adams and Franklin elementary schools. The projected cost of buying the six-acre site and relocating residents runs to $28.5 million, which is almost as much as district officials first budgeted for the entire project.

These unexpected costs have forced the district to take several steps to scale back the plans for the new schools:

[] Many school sites have been reduced to six acres.

[] The district is planning two, possibly three, "twin schools" where two schools will be on the same plot of land, eliminating the need to buy land and relocate residents.

[] Less expensive modular construction will be used at some sites in place of steel-frame construction.

Meanwhile, those in the city's crowded schools must contend with the Proposition MM delays for two to three more years.

Educators at Kimbrough Elementary say the detrimental effects of crowding become more apparent each school year.
"We are a school built for 700 kids and now we are at 1,060," said Margie Lincoln, Kimbrough's principal. "We have a multipurpose room that can house 300 kids. We have to have four or five assemblies for all the kids to see the same program."

Those at Euclid Elementary, which was originally built for 690 students, appear to accept their plight.

"We're pretty crowded, but we've never not been crowded," said principal Mitzi Merino, principal at Euclid, where 400 area children must attend other elementary schools to keep enrollment around 950.

Euclid's enrollment should drop to about 750 when Herbert Ibarra Elementary opens in 2005.

"Kids who've been here since kindergarten don't know any different," Merino said.

Caption: 3 PICS 1 CHART
1. Music teacher Serafin Paredes helped Jackson Elementary students Julio Armenta and Fabian Beltran in a hallway at Horace Mann Middle School. Jackson is so crowded that fourth- and fifth-grade students have classes at the middle school. 2. Jackson Elementary students headed to class from the playground as the first morning bell rang. New school construction should relieve crowding at Jackson and more than two dozen elementary schools. 3. At Rosa Parks Elementary School, kindergartners take a bus each day to an annex on the campus of Hoover High School, a practice that will continue until a new elementary school relieves crowding. 4. District learned its lessons the hard way. 1,2,3. Laura Embry / Union-Tribune photos 4. Karen Kucher
Memo: For chart see microfilm.
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