



MARSHA TRAEGER / Los Angeles Times

Homeowners who stand to lose their dwellings protesting at home of school board President Rita Walters on Hauser Blvd. in the Wilshire District.

It was like "a bolt out of the sky," 77-year-old Peter Bartu said, when he got a certified letter from the Los Angeles Unified School District headlined, "Notice of Decision to Appraise." The house he and his wife had lived in for 35 years just west of downtown Los Angeles, along with more than 90 other homes and apartments, was likely to be condemned "to accommodate a new elementary school site," the Feb. 6 letter said.

Within a week, as the retired security guard watched "in shock," he said four appraisers were walking over his property, measuring his wood-frame home and his yard filled with fruit trees.

Bartu is one of thousands of residents facing the same situation in 42 neighborhoods as the school district over the last few months has accelerated its efforts to acquire land for 18 new schools and 24 school expansions, at a cost of about \$392 million.

New facilities are needed in communities west of downtown Los Angeles, in the South-Central and the southeast areas to handle a projected 76,578 more children over the next five years, officials say.

The 42 proposed school sites involve 2,100 homes, apartment units or mobile homes where, by the district's estimate, 6,300 people live. **Forty-eight more projects are also contemplated, according to Max Barney, district director of school planning, involving thousands more people.**

Incensed and dismayed by the proposals, however, residents like Bartu and his neighbors on Mariposa Avenue in the Beverly-Normandie area have become part of a homeowner movement to save their homes and their neighborhoods.

In an intense and widespread backlash, tenants, homeowners and businessmen have shown up at district board meetings by the hundreds over the last two months, submitted petitions, picketed outside school board members' homes, and even staged a "funeral procession" outside City Hall on Sunday in protest.

They have formed coalitions, prepared detailed reports on their neighborhoods to rebut the site selections or promote alternative—often commercial—sites, challenged district facts, and even the district's sprawling style of school architecture.

The acquisition program has become an issue in the April 14 elections for the City Council race in the 10th District, which contains five of the proposed projects, and the reelection campaigns of school board members Rita Walters and Jackie Goldberg.

Two bills also have been introduced in the state Legislature to block the program. A measure by Assemblyman Mike Roos (D-Los Angeles) would promote the construction of multistory schools. A bill by Sen. Alan Robbins (D-Van Nuys) asks for a yearlong moratorium on land acquisitions.

"For somebody to come along and talk about taking their homes, it's very frightening," school board President Walters said. "We understand. Our dilemma is we need classrooms for children."

Fighting for Their Homes

New School Plans Turn Residents Into Activists

By PENELOPE McMILLAN
Times Staff Writer



LARRY BESSEL / Los Angeles Times

—Floretta Dungee and neighbor Yahya Amin

'One day I was out all day playing bridge and when I came home, they were in my apartment—the lady across has a key—to see if I'd fallen. That's a good feeling, that they cared.'

Most of the proposed sites are in middle-income or blue-collar neighborhoods containing many ethnic groups—Koreans, Filipinos or Thais—along with Anglos, blacks and Latinos. The sites range in size from as few as three homes in Wilmington to as many as 170—including 144 mobile homes—in Bell.

A few sites involve commercial properties, but most tend to be homes or apartments in stable neighborhoods where the loss of lower-priced homes and rent-controlled apartments worries the city Planning Department.

"The [city's] General Plan does call for the protection of stable single-family areas and stable residential neighborhoods," said Glenn Blossom, head of the department's office of general planning.

One proposed site, for example, would take homes along La Mirada and Lexington avenues in East Hollywood. The well-kept homes are islands of stability in a problem neighborhood, city planner Andrew Montealegne said.

"East Hollywood is a struggling community," he said. But, he added, there is a good solid residential base.

By removing the 124 apartments and homes earmarked in the district's plan, he said, "You would remove a sizable number of people that care. It's like replacing a heart with a pacemaker."

The decision to choose a site such as the one in East Hollywood is not based on such considerations, according to Robert Niccum, the district's director of real estate. "It's purely geographical."

Those two streets, he explained, are the exact midpoint of three existing local elementary schools that are already overcrowded.

The school district says it has been forced to plan more classrooms because of rising enrollment after years of decline in the pupil population.

After reaching a peak of 656,101 in 1969, the number of students had dropped by 1980 to 538,596. The district actually closed 22 schools between 1982 and 1984 for lack of students. All but three of the closed schools were in the San Fernando Valley.

But enrollments started climbing again in 1981. This year, the enrollment is up to 590,289, and the 1991-1992 enrollment, a district study says, is expected to be almost 667,000. Meanwhile, the last new school was built in 1972.

Enrollment projections are "based on countywide live births," said Mark Shrager, assistant director of district budget services. Recent demographic studies by a consultant pinpointed the local schools likely to have the most pupils.

The school district frequently acquires land through its eminent domain power—the legal right to appropriate property for a necessary public use after reasonable compensation is made.

But now, because the district has moved to acquire property for 42 school sites at the same time, the issue has gained widespread attention. The district decided in January to advance these proposed projects, which are in different stages of

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