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School Board endorses site for schools

Uneasy over pollutants, board leaves door open to rescinding vote

By GINA MACRIS
Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE -- School Board members said last night they are uneasy about the environmental safety of two new schools the city expects to build at Hartford Avenue and Springfield Street, on the site of a former dump where elevated levels of petroleum, lead and arsenic have been found.

The board passed a resolution endorsing the 10-acre school site, although long-time member and former chairman Roosevelt Benton made it clear that the vote still left the door open to rescinding the action if environmental concerns warrant. The state Department of Environmental Management is reviewing a site remedy plan submitted by the city, and the work cannot proceed until the agency gives its approval.

"I don't understand DEM reports," Benton said. "If people don't want to send their kids there, I'm going to say no, regardless of what DEM says."

Benton and board members Olga Noguera and Juan Lopez picked up on questions raised by the audience, sometimes strenuously, about the safety of the site, especially in light of the fact that the actual test results and the proposed soil remedy plan have not been made public.

Lopez, the only School Board member to vote against the endorsement of the \$30 million project, said the board has never met with the community in the Hartford Park and Manton section of the city to find out how they feel.

Noguera said "this information" on the soil contaminants "should be available to the public. There should be public comment."

In fact, a DEM official has told the City Council that it will not approve a remedial plan unless a public hearing and comment period are held.

In the meantime, DEM has a cease-and-desist order on any work on the site, and a Superior Court judge has issued a temporary restraining order on plans for construction because of a dispute involving project labor agreements.

Judge Michael A. Silverstein is expected to rule on the legality of

the project labor agreement by tomorrow.

But it was not clear last night when DEM might lift its cease-and-desist order, issued after it found city workers removing trees, digging holes and removing soil.

The city was supposed to have begun construction last Thursday, leaving only five months until the start of school next September -- the target date for completing project -- but the city's acting director of public property, Alan R. Sepe, refuses to concede that it is too late to start the project.

Last night, Rodolfo A. Vargas, president of the Latin American Professionals Organization, told the School Board that his organization's research indicates that encapsulating toxic materials, as the city proposes, is not always a permanent solution.

"Are you willing to send your children to that school or willing to build a house on top of a landfill?" Vargas asked School Board members.

Juan Pichardo, president of the Dominican American Political Action Committee, said, "Isn't this board concerned . . . what the effect may be in the next 10 to 20 years? "

Hamlet Lopez, a member of the Latino community, said the School Board's approval of the site is "not only unacceptable, but could be criminal," in violation of state law that requires the board to promote the educational welfare of the city's children.

The bond counsel to the Providence Public Building Authority, the agency that would issue \$39 million in bonds to pay for the new schools and other projects, told the board that DEM must approve the environmental cleanup before the bonds are actually sold.

The bond lawyer, Karen Grande, also told the School Board it could rescind its approval, stopping the project, anytime before the PPBA actually sells the bonds.

The City Council has already approved the \$39 million bond issue, and Grande told the School Board its endorsement is also required by law for the project to proceed.

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