

4,000 Homes, No Schools in Sight; Education: State lacks funds for promised Tustin-Irvine campuses. A fall bond issue may help.

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Abstract:

[Mellisa Winter] said her two children must travel across town to Tustin High School, a crowded campus where 18 portables provide some classroom space. Other parents send children to Foothill High, where 21 portables are used. The schools are accommodating hundreds of students from the new housing tracts, said Mark Eliot, Tustin Unified School District's communications director.

Winter, [Lyann Collins] and others who live in upscale houses in West Irvine, Northpark, Northpark Square and Tustin Ranch fall within a Mello-Roos taxation district, meaning homeowners pay extra to subsidize new schools.

Construction Delayed; CREDIT: Los Angeles Times; Rhys Morgan, 13, on skateboard, and Peter Gilroy, 12, zip past the proposed site of Beckman High School on Bryan Avenue in Tustin.; PHOTOGRAPHER: DON BARTLETTI / Los Angeles Times; "I'm starting to panic," said Lyann Collins of Irvine, who said she pays at least \$1,300 a year in taxes to subsidize campus construction. "The school might not be there when I need it."; PHOTOGRAPHER: KEVIN P. CASEY / Los Angeles Times

Full Text:

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Before deciding to buy her \$441,000 home in Irvine, Lyann Collins remembers driving through the development and seeing the sign announcing that a new high school would open in the fall of 2003.

The mother of four said the promise of a new school sealed her decision to move into West Irvine, an upscale community with manicured parks, community swimming pools and neatly groomed soccer fields. Two years later, the sign remains but the promised opening date has been erased.

"I'm starting to panic," said Collins, whose oldest child is 10. "The school might not be there when I need it."

More than 4,000 homes have been built along the border of Irvine and Tustin, communities where residents pay hundreds of dollars a year to fund the new schools. But Arnold O. Beckman High School and Hicks Canyon Elementary have yet to be built.

The problem is that although residents have paid enough to buy the land, the state has run out of money to build the schools. The money earmarked for Tustin Unified was shifted to help fund school work in Los Angeles and other urban school districts.

Officials say the situation in the Tustin and Irvine neighborhoods reflects a statewide trend in which the state has been unable to meet all the requests for funds to build or repair schools. There is a backlog of \$2.9 billion in requests for state money and only \$450 million left of the 1998 state bond that funds school construction, said Jim Bush, assistant director of school planning for the state Department of

Education.

A new state bond will be on the November ballot, providing a fresh flow of money if it passes

Still, the situation for parents like Mellisa Winter, who bought her West Irvine home with the impression that "exceptional schools" would soon be built, has been frustrating.

Winter said her two children must travel across town to Tustin High School, a crowded campus where 18 portables provide some classroom space. Other parents send children to Foothill High, where 21 portables are used. The schools are accommodating hundreds of students from the new housing tracts, said Mark Eliot, Tustin Unified School District's communications director.

"It's very disappointing," Winter said. "I don't know that we would have bought in this area if we would have known that the new high school would not be built."

Winter, Collins and others who live in upscale houses in West Irvine, Northpark, Northpark Square and Tustin Ranch fall within a Mello-Roos taxation district, meaning homeowners pay extra to subsidize new schools.

Collins said she pays at least \$1,300 a year in Mello-Roos taxes, meaning by the time the 30-year mortgage on the house is paid, \$39,000 will have been directed toward building local schools. The state is supposed to match the funds to get the schools built, in this case Beckman High and Hicks Canyon Elementary.

The matching money was expected to come from the \$6.7-billion school bond approved by voters in 1998. Originally, the money was available on a first-come, first-served basis.

As with other suburban districts, Tustin "flourished" under this approach, said Supt. Pete Gorman. With the ability to raise lots of money with Mello-Roos districts, land could be bought, architects hired and plans drawn much more quickly than in cash-strapped urban areas.

Change in Fund Rules Hurts Suburban Schools

All that changed last year when the Los Angeles Unified School District sued the state, asserting that the first-come, first-served system was unfair for urban districts. Los Angeles Unified asked that the funds be handed out first to districts with pressing needs such as overcrowding and deteriorating schools.

Since then, it has been harder for suburban schools to compete with Los Angeles and other urban areas, said Brock Wagner, assistant superintendent of business services for Tustin's district.

"If you are out there with Los Angeles, L.A. will beat you every single time," Wagner said. "They can always prove that they have bigger problems than [we do]. It's like fighting Goliath; you are not going to beat them."

The new Irvine and Tustin neighborhoods raised \$3.6 million in Mello-Roos taxes last year. With that money, bonds were issued to buy the land from the Irvine Co. for Beckman High and Hicks Canyon Elementary. The cost of the two schools will be roughly \$112 million, half of which the state had agreed to pay. But, for now, the money is just not there.

At a recent meeting, Gorman tried to convince residents that there are alternatives for getting the schools built.

Tustin, like other districts, has its hopes pinned on a \$13- billion school bond, which will be on the November ballot.

The bond money would be distributed on a first-come, first- served basis and would set aside \$2.9 billion for schools with projects that have been approved but remain unfunded. This would place the Tustin district in a position to receive matching funds immediately, Bush said.

The district is also negotiating with the Irvine Co. to front the money. The firm is receptive, said the company's Rich Elbaum.

Although the company is "under no legal obligation to do so," it is exploring ways to help the district begin construction, Elbaum said.

The district could also scale back the design of Beckman High School, an option that doesn't go over with Collins and other parents, who say they expect a first-rate school with a pool and state-of-the-art gymnasium for the amount of taxes they are paying.

"It's really hard to work up any sympathy for these people living in their million-dollar homes and their manicured soccer fields," Collins conceded. "But every kid in here is imposing on a kid in Tustin High."

[Illustration]

Caption: GRAPHIC: Construction Delayed; CREDIT: Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: Rhys Morgan, 13, on skateboard, and Peter Gilroy, 12, zip past the proposed site of Beckman High School on Bryan Avenue in Tustin.; PHOTOGRAPHER: DON BARTLETTI / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: "I'm starting to panic," said Lyann Collins of Irvine, who said she pays at least \$1,300 a year in taxes to subsidize campus construction. "The school might not be there when I need it."; PHOTOGRAPHER: KEVIN P. CASEY / Los Angeles Times

Credit: TIMES STAFF WRITER