

Irvine parents launch school campaign

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The Irvine Co. plans to meet with angry parents who organized SIMBY--Schools In My Backyard--because the developer would not lend the burgeoning Tustin Unified School District \$15 million to build a high school.

Rich Elbaum, a spokesman for The Irvine Co., said school district officials misinformed parents, and that the company has offered Tustin Unified a \$5 million loan "in good faith" to help with school construction.

At issue are plans to build Arnold O. **Beckman High School** and Hicks Canyon Elementary, both scheduled to open in fall 2003, which Tustin officials have put on hold indefinitely.

Both school sites are in Irvine but are part of the Tustin school district.

In February, Tustin district officials announced that building the two schools would be delayed because state funding had fallen through.

To help get construction started, Tustin Unified had requested a \$15 million loan from The Irvine Co., to be paid back in developer fees, to build **Beckman High**. The **school** district collects developer fees on new residential and commercial/industrial projects in a school's enrollment area.

Tustin Unified has \$30 million for the \$54 million school. But Superintendent Peter Gorman said the district needs at least \$39 million to start building the high school.

On June 21, The Irvine Co. offered the school district a \$5 million loan.

Two West Irvine parents launched SIMBY last week after receiving an e-mail from Gorman informing them that The Irvine Co. would keep excess developer fees owed to the school district.

"This is clearly not acceptable. We believe that there is more than \$5 million in developer fees still owed (to the school) and ... (The Irvine Co.) would keep the difference between \$5 million and the total owed," said Gorman in a June 25 e-mail to parents Paul Madick and Lyann Collins.

But Elbaum said that Gorman is misinformed and that The Irvine Co. has no intention of keeping developer fees owed to the school district.

"We not only wouldn't, but also couldn't, keep the development fees," he said. "By law, those have to go to the

school district. It's surprising to me that the school district wouldn't understand that all of the developer fees go to them."

After reading Gorman's e-mail to the parents, Elbaum said Monday night that he informed Gorman that the information was incorrect.

Even if The Irvine Co. had made a good-faith loan, Lyann Collins said parents are still moving forward with their campaign. A \$5 million loan is not enough to build the schools.

"This is a crisis situation," said Collins, who is trying to organize parents from West Irvine, Northpark and Northpark Square neighborhoods.

Collins and other SIMBY parents said they plan to stage protests and inform prospective homebuyers about the delays in building the two schools.

High school students from the Irvine neighborhoods will have to attend Tustin high schools this year.

Tustin Unified's two high schools already are overcrowded. Tustin High School has a capacity for 1,692 students. With 18 portable classrooms, it now serves 2,073. Foothill High School has a 1,773-student capacity. With 21 portable classrooms, it serves 2,227.

Parents who had planned to send their children to Hicks Canyon have enrolled them in the overcrowded Myford and Ladera elementary schools.

On June 13, Tustin Unified voted to spend \$40,000 to bus 90 students from Northpark Square to Ladera Elementary School. In April, the school board voted to spend \$368,000 to add eight portables at Myford Elementary.

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