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Oakland: Head-Royce School, neighbors at odds over permit



Ninth graders work on assignments in the courtyard area during their free period at Head Royce School in Oakland, Calif. on Monday, Dec. 3, 2012. (Laura A. Oda/Staff)

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OAKLAND — Private school Head-Royce and its neighbors are headed to what looks to be a contentious planning meeting Wednesday as the city of Oakland responds to the school asking to revise its conditional-use permit, potentially allowing it to increase enrollment.

But the issue is about more than the number of students. It's just one more step in what has long been a rocky relationship between the prominent K-12 school and some neighbors, who say their concerns have been pushed aside.

"It's just coming to a head," said Donna Egan, a representative of the neighborhood group who has organized around the issue.

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But the school believes it has made a good-faith effort to compromise — and says it has largely succeeded.

"At every turn, I have seen the school do everything it can to be a good neighbor," said Crystal Land, the current head of school.

At the Wednesday meeting, the school will get a response to its request for the city to modify its permit, allowing it to increase enrollment without waiting for a previously agreed-upon deadline of 2021 — and to approve the fact that it's already slightly overenrolled.

“It is a little bit higher than we are approved for, about 3 percent,” said Land, who began a two-year interim position at the school this month.

The school would like approval for the current number of students, 875, and to get permission to grow to 906 without waiting for the 2021 deadline.

“It just gives us some flexibility in our enrollment,” Land said, adding that the school has no specific plans to use the increase at the current time.

The school would also like to remove certain other conditions of its permit and get approval for its current traffic plan. But traffic is one of the most contentious points.

“It’s truly a terrifying scene on many mornings,” Egan said.

Besides car drop-offs, which happen on the street rather than on the school property, she described AC Transit buses that transport students getting stuck at intersections and wedged behind parked cars; and school buses, which take students from prearranged pickup points, clogging the narrow residential streets.

Land said the school is continually trying to address traffic management, including providing on-site parking for employees, hiring traffic monitors and constantly reminding the school community that they are sharing a residential neighborhood. Opposition to many of the school’s measures has coalesced into a group representing around 380 people who live near Head-Royce, said Egan.

“We have so much documentation, it’s funny,” she said.

But Land seemed almost surprised at the acrimony, saying the school had continually addressed concerns.

“We have made so many changes in the past five years,” she said.

Neighbors, however, say the school relies on a charm offensive but fails to address the actual problems.

“They haven’t operated in good faith is the problem,” Egan said.

It's been a troubled relationship as far back as 2006, when the school came up with a master plan and made agreements with neighbors on how to handle construction, expansion and traffic issues.

And while school officials say the active group does not represent the many neighbors who have no issue with the campus, claims seem to be true that the school hasn't followed the rules laid down in its previous use permits, as the neighbors' group states. The city of Oakland has had to intervene to keep Head-Royce to its agreements several times, according to a letter from the Planning Department dated this summer.

"The school received several letters regarding noncompliance over the years," confirmed Heather Klein, of the city's Planning Department.

The city even went so far in 2012 as to begin a process to revoke its permits. But the school made changes that satisfied the city — except for enrollment, which stayed above the level it was supposed to be.

Hovering in the background is the knowledge that Head-Royce recently bought the Lincoln Child Center, which helps vulnerable and traumatized children, across the street. The land was once the site of the Royce boys school that merged with the Anna Head girls school to create Head-Royce in 1979. Currently, the school is developing a plan for the new grounds, which will allow Head-Royce to expand its campus size by more than 50 percent.

"That's probably two or three years out," Land said.

But neighbors fear further encroachment.

"It's in our picture, hanging over us like a lead balloon," Egan said.

The Planning Department's Robert Merkamp said the staff report on whether to approve the school's requests on Wednesday will be published Friday.

"We're still putting the finishing touches on the report," he said.

The report will be available to the public, and anyone who is interested can come to the meeting. But whatever happens at the Planning Commission meeting, the issues are unlikely to disappear. Egan stressed that neither she nor the other organized neighbors are against having the school there, but that they refuse to back down until their concerns are addressed.

“Things are going to escalate, for sure,” she said.

As for Land, she said the school is committed to working realistically with the people who live nearby.

“We want to be a good neighbor, and we also want to run a school,” she said.

FYI

The Oakland Planning Commission will meet at 6 p.m. Wednesday in the City Council chambers, City Hall, One Frank H. Ogawa Plaza, Oakland.