

Walnut to fight Mt. San Antonio College Parking Structure



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A five-level parking structure to be built on the north end of Mount San Antonio College abutting the Timberline neighborhood in Walnut is shaping up as a classic town-versus-gown showdown.

The town — upper middle class city of Walnut — has voted to oppose the structure. The community college, the largest in the state, has moved forward with design plans and shows no signs of backing down.

Not long after the City Council voted 5-0 to ask the college to build the \$53 million, 2,200-space structure elsewhere on the 420-acre campus and not near homes, the Council asked for an ordinance banning heavy-duty trucks on Mountaineer Road, the main road that leads to the northwestern section of Mt. SAC.

It is the only road that serves the 331 Timberline homes.

If Mt. SAC pursues the project with such an ordinance in place, it will have to find another way for contractors to reach the site, presumably through the college property.

In addition, the City Council asked City Manager Rob Wishner to contact Costa Mesa, which is battling expansion plans at Orange Coast College, including a proposed parking garage.

Last week, six residents of Timberline spoke before the Mt. SAC Board of Trustees. They said the structure will add traffic, air pollution and lower the property values of their homes, some of which are 300 feet away.

The group told the board advertising for the \$353 million bond measure to be used to fund the project did not mention a new parking structure. Instead, literature said the bond revenues would be used to repair pipes, remove asbestos, upgrade classrooms and retrofit buildings for energy efficiency and seismic safety.

Layla Abou-Taleb, a resident of Timberline, said she learned from Councilman Robert Pacheco that 1,300 spaces would be reserved for staff. “We’re using bond money to build a parking structure for staff? I don’t think anyone would’ve voted for that,” Abou-Taleb told the board at its Sept. 10 meeting.

The bond was approved by voters in November 2008, garnering nearly 70 percent of the vote. A Nov. 5, 2008 press release from Mt. SAC mentions the parking structure as one of several possible projects.

Mt. SAC board members did not comment on the issue at the meeting and have not responded to the Aug. 27 city resolution. Board member David Hall did not return a phone call Wednesday. A Timberline resident reported Hall had asked campaigners in 2008 not to mention the parking structure.

The group has asked the city of Walnut to take jurisdiction of the project and allow it to be reviewed by its planning staff and voted on by its Planning Commission. So far, that has not happened because the state has authority over community colleges as long as on-campus projects are for educational purposes. City Attorney Michael Montgomery reportedly told the group the structure is considered a classroom facility and therefore is not subject to city approval.

“The resolution was passed but it doesn’t have any teeth. We feel the city can do a lot more to get Mt. SAC to the table,” she said. “I’d like them to tell Mt. SAC this is not a classroom and therefore it has to be under our jurisdiction.”

When Orange Coast College proposed building a hotel on campus, dorm rooms and shops and restaurants on Fairview Road in Costa Mesa, the City Council put up the stop sign and is asking to review these projects.

“The state is continually telling these schools to be entrepreneurial in order to make money. They are going beyond what their mission is,” said Costa Mesa Mayor Jim Righeimer during an interview Wednesday.

Righeimer also objected to Orange Coast College expanding enrollment, something that Walnut City Council members have objected to regarding Mt. SAC, which is at about 60,000 students. Righeimer told the student newspaper “OCC does not need to be educating 12,000 students from Shanghai.”

He said community colleges are given free land by the state which they are exploiting for development.

“If our city tried to put in a five-story parking structure across the street from single-family houses we would be lynched,” he said.

No meetings have taken place between the two cities. “I’m available,” Righeimer said.

Mt. SAC held several meetings about the parking garage since 2009. College officials chose the site because it is near the cafeteria and classroom buildings used by students.

President Bill Scroggins said the site and design were sketched out in 2007 and shared with the city and the Timberline residents, including a decision to sink part of it underground to reduce sight lines. The project was included in materials handed out to residents explaining Measure RR, he said.

The parking garage is part of a five-year facilities plan approved by the Mt. SAC board last year, Scroggins said.