

Walnut group and Mt SAC win court victories, but 3 college projects still in limbo



Backed by residents of United Walnut Taxpayers plaintiff Layla Abou-Taleb, center, asks a judge at Los Angeles Superior Court on Wednesday, April 15, 2015 for a temporary restraining order to halt construction of Mt. SAC's 5-story proposed parking garage near homes on the northside of the campus. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz/Pasadena Star-News)

By [Steve Scauzillo](#), San Gabriel Valley Tribune

1/25/16

Three projects at the Mount San Antonio College campus in Walnut remain in the hands of the courts after a judge refused to dismiss a lawsuit brought against the college by a neighborhood group claiming environmental damage.

Barring any settlement, Mt. SAC must wait for the outcome of a trial, or at least until the next court hearing Feb. 11 in Los Angeles Superior Court, before getting the green light for the following projects: A 2,300-space parking garage; a 2.2-megawatt solar farm, and a [\\$62-million upgrade of an athletic stadium](#).



Mt.

SAC plans to build a solar farm on property they own between Grand Avenue and Regal Canyon Drive in Walnut, Calif. Nov. 9, 2015. (Photo by Leo Jarzomb/San Gabriel Valley Tribune)

In a hearing Thursday, Judge James Chalfant denied the college's request to dismiss the suit brought by United Walnut Taxpayers. In addition, the group turned down a settlement offer for attorneys' fees because Mt. SAC refused to erase the parking garage from its facilities master plan.

"It was a very strong win for us," said Layla Abou-Taleb, founder and president of United Walnut Taxpayers and a Timberline resident. The group [was successful](#) last May in getting a [preliminary injunction](#) to stop the five-story garage from being built near Mountaineer Road, 150 feet from Timberline homes.

"We are concerned about the tremendous amount of cars and traffic this structure would bring to our residential community. But they are adamant about putting it here under our noses," she said.

The group has also claimed in court that a proposed solar farm and an upgrade of Hilmer Lodge Stadium were also in violation of state environmental and city zoning laws. However, Chalfant denied the group's request for preliminary injunction against the solar project.

"The fact that it wasn't granted is positive for us," said Bill Scroggins, president of Mt. SAC on Monday. "The direction of the suit is moving in a favorable direction for Mt. SAC."

Mt. SAC attorney Sean Absher said the denial of an injunction was a significant victory for the college. “Judge Chalfant found that United Walnut Taxpayers ‘has presented no admissible evidence of harm to the environment,’ Absher wrote in an email response. “This validates Mt. SAC’s commitment to ensuring the solar project proceeds in compliance with all environmental laws.”

The court battles mark a sea change in the way projects are approved by Mt. SAC’s Board of Trustees and built at the 420-acre college, the largest single-campus community college in the state. In the past, not a single one was ever challenged.

Chalfant allowed a separate complaint from the group to be filed against Tilden-Coil Constructors, Inc., which challenges the college’s lease-leaseback arrangement for the solar project as a “sham” and a way to avoid competitive bidding.

In addition, the city of Walnut has also filed suit against Mt. SAC, saying the college must file plans with City Hall and get a Conditional Use Permit before it constructs a solar field on a 24-acre property at Grand Avenue and Temple Avenue/Amar Road. The judge will consider consolidating the two cases on Feb. 11.

[Walnut’s suit](#) says the college must follow city zoning regulations before grading, running dump trucks on Grand or installing solar panels on the hillside near homes. But Mt. SAC said school districts and community colleges are exempt.

Scroggins said the judge did not bring up the Hilmer Lodge Stadium project at the hearing. “We are proceeding with the project. We anticipate it to begin in the fall, sometime in September or October,” he said.