

New El Cerrito middle school within sight

By Rick Radin

For the Contra Costa Times

Posted: 06/03/2013 03:21:36 PM PDT

Updated: 06/03/2013 03:48:39 PM PDT



Speaking in front of a row of shovels and hard hats, John Gioia, the District I supervisor for Contra Costa County addresses the audience at a groundbreaking ceremony for the new Portola Middle School, Sunday, June 2, 2013 in El Cerrito, Calif. The ceremony kicks off the construction of a project that's been in the works since 2002.

EL CERRITO -- All the drama and politics that have often characterized the sprawling West Contra Costa school district seem to have come together in the tortuous 10-year effort to rebuild El Cerrito's Portola Middle School.

But now that a site has been agreed on, a design approved, construction contracts awarded and lawsuits settled, the district and the community celebrated in joy and relief Sunday with a groundbreaking ceremony for the new \$43 million school.

Barring further snags, the new Portola will open on the site of the former Castro Elementary School, at 7125 Donal Ave., in a little more than two years.

"Political futures have been won and lost on this drama, and deep divisions are finally starting to heal," said Kensington parent Bobbie Dowling, who has been active in the push for a new school. "Kids who were supposed to be in the first classes there will be in college before its doors open."

Money for the Portola reconstruction was authorized initially by Measure D, a \$300 million bond issue that passed in 2002.

The roadblocks and delays along the way have become legendary, many parents and district observers say.

The old Portola campus sat on a steep slope a short distance from where the Hayward fault runs through the El Cerrito hills.

A state seismic survey revealed that the three-story classroom building was a threat to slide down the hill in a major quake.

"Right after I took over in 2006,

I received an engineering report saying that Portola was a substantial hazard and students needed to be taken out of there," Superintendent Bruce Harter said.

There were also concerns about student safety and the viability of the school as an environment for learning. Teachers and administrators struggled to control violence that occurred in the steep stairwells at the ends of the building and in the hallways.

The district responded by moving the students into portable classrooms on the playground beneath the old school, where they have been for the past three years, and demolishing the old structure. The temporary campus lacks a gym and a library.

The state also rejected the current Portola site for a new campus because of concerns over earthquakes and landslides, so a new site needed to be found.

After considerable debate, West Contra Costa decided to close Castro and build the new Portola there, but a group of residents sued to stop the project.

West Contra Costa went to court, won the case and fought off an appeal by the residents, consisting of some who wanted to preserve Castro and others who objected to living next to a middle school.

The district also considered closing Fairmont Elementary School and building the new Portola on that site, but that plan would have required acquiring some adjoining residences through eminent domain to make the site large enough.

"Fairmont and Castro were pitted against each other (during that process)," said Galen Murphy, the current Fairmont principal who was Castro's last principal.

Still other tangles arose that were eventually resolved in favor of the current plan.

A majority of the school board at one point supported closing Portola altogether in favor of dispersing the students to four elementary schools and El Cerrito and Kennedy high schools, creating four K-8 and two 7-12 schools in the process.

That idea failed when one of the trustees switched sides and voted to certify the environmental impact report for the new school construction, allowing the project to proceed.

But, with all the delays, projected construction costs rose, and Portola got lost in the tangle of competing priorities within the district's billion-dollar-plus bond program.

A \$20 million seismic safety grant from the state finally put the project over the top.

West Contra Costa received the entire amount in the seismic account because no one else applied for it, said veteran trustee Charles Ramsey

School board member Todd Groves, whose two daughters attended Portola, termed it "a ludicrous project" because of the difficulties.

"You can feel how much the people struggled over that time," Groves said.

Still, he said he loves the plans for the new school and thinks it will be worth the wait.

"The design is so subtle, it'll fit right into the neighborhood," Groves said. "I wish I could go to school here. I'm excited.