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Riverside education leaders appear to have reached a consensus to make building an elementary school in the city's Eastside community a top priority.

The Riverside school board also appears poised to boost the construction budget for North High School –another desire of Eastside residents who worry about deteriorating conditions at the aging campus that bears the name of a founder of the Inland Empire's largest city. Riverside Unified School District board members signaled their intent during a nearly seven-hour meeting Aug. 19, in which they received an update on plans for new schools in Eastside and Highgrove, just outside the city limits.

Also during that session, five North High teachers told stories of rats, cockroaches and flooding in science classrooms, prompting board members to call for immediate steps to address the problems and a boost in construction spending to make long-term fixes.

No decisions were made. But the board voted unanimously to put on a later agenda potential decisions to prioritize the Eastside project over other new schools and to increase North's budget. At the same upcoming meeting, the board is set to be updated on escalating costs of projects financed in part by the district's Measure O — a \$392 million bond measure passed by voters in 2016 and a crucial source of funding.

District spokesperson Diana Meza said the board is expected to take up those matters Oct. 7.

"The Eastside school clearly has to be the priority," said trustee Angelo Farooq, according to a videotape of the Aug. 19 meeting.

Board member Kathy Allavie said at the meeting that in 2005, when she was a new board member, the district planned to build an Eastside school but did not find a suitable site. And, as a result, she said, no school was built, "much to our regret."

Allavie called it a mistake not to commit to a school then, adding "we're not going to let that happen again."

Rich Davis, long-time Eastside resident and North High alumnus who worked 35 years for the district and 20 years as a North administrator, said Friday, Aug. 27, that he is pleased to see board support for building a new school and addressing the problems at North. But he said board members could — and should have — addressed them earlier and it's disappointing that it took a "community backlash" to move the board.

Eleven people from community groups spoke about the need for an elementary school. One was Riverside City Council Member Gaby Plascencia. Another was a representative for Council Member Clarissa Cervantes, whose Ward 2 includes the Eastside.

Most speakers urged the district to build a campus for Eastside youngsters before other schools — including a specialized science, technology, engineering and math school called the STEM Education Center at UC Riverside.

For more than a half century, Eastside children have been bused to schools outside their neighborhood, said Yolanda Esquivel, past president of the Riverside Council of the League of United Latin American Citizens. They have missed out on after-school tutoring opportunities and extracurricular activities, she said.

Miguel Lujano, legislative field representative for Cervantes, read a letter from the Ward 2 council person.

“I have personally connected with hundreds of residents on the Eastside that have expressed to me a clear message: We must stop busing on the Eastside,” Cervantes wrote.

The busing began in 1965 after someone fire-bombed — and destroyed — the neighborhood Lowell Elementary School, forcing the transportation of its students elsewhere. Today, Assistant Superintendent Sergio San Martin said, the Eastside has Longfellow and Emerson elementary schools. But 1,400 students are bused to schools outside the neighborhood, he said.

“Building an Eastside school doesn’t solve our busing problem,” board member Dale Kinnear told colleagues at the meeting.

The new school would accommodate 750 students — only about half of those who get on buses each morning, Kinnear said.

“It’s a good start, but the issue still remains,” Kinnear said.

San Martin said the district plans to build the Eastside school at 14th Street and Howard Avenue. One option involves using nearby Lincoln Park. Other options involve the next-door Abraham Lincoln Continuation High School, which could be relocated or remain. The district is trying to assemble about 8 acres for the project, he said, and to date has purchased 12 properties with one more in escrow — and more needed.

As for North High, the campus on Third Street is in “very significant need of attention,” said Farooq, the board member.

The school’s \$26 million allocation of Measure O money is “absolutely insufficient” and must be increased — and perhaps doubled, he said.

In May, a North High School Visioning Design Committee listed \$157.1 million in needed upgrades, including the library, theater, gym, cafeteria and classrooms.

Teachers’ descriptions of campus problems grabbed the board’s attention. One of those who spoke was Cassandra Barker, who said she has taught science at North for six years in one of the school’s original buildings.

"I spent the summer before my first year not lesson planning but painting the cabinets over all the scribbles and scratches and dirt that had built up over the years to make my classroom a more welcoming place for my kids," she told the board.

There are holes where gas lines were removed in the 1980s, Barker said.

"So what happens is, trash and unlucky school supplies fall down in there. ... And there they stay forever," she said. "As you might expect, I have a consistent ant, rat and cockroach problem."

Barker added that she keeps the water off in her classroom because, if she doesn't, "there are puddles everywhere."

Science teacher Josh Hiraoka said his classroom is next to Barker's and he, too, must keep water turned off to prevent puddles. He said the sinks don't work and there is a rat infestation.

Sammie Luna-Smith, a 1996 graduate who is the North Alumni Association president, said when she visited in May she was taken aback by air fresheners in all the vents in a classroom.

"It was all a teacher could do to mask a musty smell," she said. "I can only imagine how whatever was causing that smell could also be impacting the health of that teacher and all the students that visit that classroom each day."

After she and the teachers spoke, board President Tom Hunt asked Superintendent Renee Hill to address the worst problems immediately and called the reports "shocking." Kinnear, a former North principal, said fixing the problem will require more than stepped-up maintenance — it will require an investment in new facilities at North.

When it comes to investing in an Eastside elementary school, making the project a top priority is one thing. Eastside activist Shirley Tribble said it also must be built in a suitable location.

Tribble called the site northeast of Howard and 14th the wrong place because it is across the street from a liquor store, next to a high school and near a train station and busy freeway.

"We need it in a nice area," she said.

The district looked for other sites but had difficulty finding one large enough in the densely populated neighborhood, San Martin said.

Farooq said the chosen site was "literally the only option that was feasible."