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School boundary plan stirs anxiety

By Walter Yost -- Bee Staff Writer

Published 2:15 am PST Thursday, November 24, 2005

Attendance boundary changes almost always can be counted on to spark debate and stir emotions, as school boards attempt to balance enrollments and plan for the future.

The El Dorado Union High School District is no exception.

Parents, as well as future parents, have circulated petitions, created Web sites and shown up for a slew of informational meetings regarding plans to shift high school boundaries for the 2006-2007 school year.

Amid a barrage of public feedback, much of it critical, district Superintendent Sherry Smith said she is impressed by "how much people care about their schools."

"Loyalties to the high schools are very strong," she said.

A district boundary committee will meet from 4 to 8 p.m. Tuesday in the Ponderosa High School cafeteria, 3661 Ponderosa Road, Shingle Springs, to consider four proposals and make a recommendation to the district board of trustees. The board will hold a public hearing on the recommendation Dec. 13 and approve a plan at their Jan. 10 meeting.

Officials say growing enrollment projections of area middle school districts, which feed into the high school district, along with changing enrollment within the district and the development of new housing, prompted formation of the boundary committee earlier this year.

The district originally planned to build a fifth comprehensive high school near the El Dorado Hills/Cameron Park border. But with rising construction costs in recent years, Smith said building a new school is not feasible and will be postponed.

A new comprehensive high school, she said, would cost about \$80 million.

As a result, the district is committed to redrawing attendance boundaries for its existing high schools - Oak Ridge, Ponderosa, Union Mine and El Dorado - to balance student enrollment.

The proposed changes, however, have drawn organized opposition, most strongly in Cameron Park, Shingle Springs and Rescue. Many parents there say boundary changes are being made to accommodate new development on the western border of the county, at the expense of older, established communities.

A number of parents in El Dorado Hills also oppose one of the proposed boundary changes, which would send many of their children to Ponderosa High School rather than Oak Ridge High.

Critics argue that the boundary change process is moving too fast and the district hasn't adequately analyzed alternative solutions such as building a smaller school or installing temporary classrooms at Oak Ridge and Ponderosa until a new high school can be built.

"Our main concern is that the district value its existing students over new students," said Suzanna George, a parent who lives in Rescue.

"I think all four plans are wrong," said Erin Johnson, another Rescue resident who has one child in

elementary school and another in middle school.

Johnson said the boundary proposals would result in her sixth-grade son going to El Dorado High School in Placerville, while many of his friends would attend Ponderosa in Shingle Springs.

Those bonds between children who attend elementary and middle school together shouldn't be broken, Johnson and George said.

"Children need that support more than ever," George said.

She and other parents also say school officials need to look at solutions other than building a comprehensive high school.

A smaller magnet school, she said, could be built for less money and without having to divide up students and families.

George also said the district may have overestimated the amount of growth that will occur in El Dorado Hills and which has spurred the effort to change boundaries.

In response to critics, Smith said she understands the anxiety caused by boundary changes, but the district needed to put forth some proposals as "starting points."

"If we left everyone where they are, we wouldn't solve the problem," she said.

The school district, Smith said, can't afford to wait any longer to adjust attendance boundaries without severely affecting campus populations.

Regarding the idea of building a smaller magnet-type school, Smith said the district took a survey in 2002 and found that "overwhelmingly, parents of the feeder districts favored a comprehensive high school."

Ultimately, both Smith and George say the final boundary plan will likely be some sort of compromise.

"The compromise that will come forward will affect the minimum number of children possible," George predicted.

"Out of this process, I think we'll have hybrid plans," Smith said.

The final informational meeting will be from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Monday at Miller's Hill school, 7900 South Shingle Road, Shingle Springs.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

What is your opinion of redrawing El Dorado Union High School District boundaries? Mail: Sacramento Bee, 1835 Prairie City Road, Folsom CA 95630. E-mail: ldouglas@sacbee.com. Fax: (916) 985-8473.

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