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School district to purchase second school site property

The Rescue Union School District Board of Trustees unanimously voted to enter into a \$1.625 million purchase and sale agreement with two private sellers on two parcels of land totaling 21 acres on Sienna Ridge Road to build a future school.

This Sept. 8 action comes seven months after the district closed escrow on the \$300,000 Bass Lake property it purchased from the El Dorado Irrigation District.

Rescue USD Superintendent David Swart said the new location at Bass Lake Road (east side) and Serrano Parkway (south side) is a better fit for the district for several reasons and as soon as escrow is complete, the district will reevaluate what to do with the Bass Lake property.

A main reason for the change was accessibility issues. Earlier this year Parker Development and the El Dorado Hills Community Services District submitted a request to the county Planning Commission to rezone the property next to the Bass Lake site from commercial to recreation to build a public park.

"At the same time, Parker Development submitted an amended plan for Village J Lot H that would have eliminated any access to the Bass Lake property, including Sellwood Field, from Serrano Parkway," said Rescue Union's Chief Business and Operations Official Sid Albaugh.

At last Tuesday's board meeting, Swart said it could have cost the district millions to build a road. "Only after discovering Rescue's access to the property might be in jeopardy did the district consider other options for a school site in the Bass Lake area," he said.

"The Sienna Ridge Road properties became available for purchase and provided a rare opportunity to purchase vacant land with exceptional accessibility for a school site in the Bass Lake area to serve Upper Serrano residents," Swart explained. "Prior to the new intersection at Bass Lake Road and Serrano Parkway, there was limited access to Sienna Ridge Road. The lighted intersection improved accessibility and the utilities are already in place."

Swart said the move also gives the district autonomy in its own decision-making.

The district is considering building a K-8 school to serve 800 students at the site. The two parcels could potentially adjoin the Serrano J5 public park proposed by Parker Development and the EDHCS.

During the 60-day escrow period, various tests and assessments will take place, including a Caltrans review and an environmental assessment. The district has the option to extend the escrow period an additional 30 days up to four times. Albaugh noted the California Department of Education has visited the site and provided an initial site approval.

Funding for the purchase will come from the El Dorado School Financing Authority Community Facilities District No. 1, which holds \$6 million in funds designated for Rescue Union School District site acquisition and school construction in the upper Serrano and Bass Lake area.

CFD funds continue to be a contentious topic for some Serrano homeowners whose Mello-Roos taxes fund it. Resident Catie Phemester said she would like to see those funds used to update existing school sites instead of building new ones.

"This district should be more focused on improving current schools and increasing capacity at existing schools rather than purchasing property that will not benefit the district in the foreseeable future," she told Village Life. "Have you seen Marina Village Middle School? It's being held together by duct tape and spit." Plemester said she also takes issue with the district's demographic forecast, which projects enrollment numbers to climb with already approved housing projects.

Swart and Albaugh both said fiscal responsibility has and will continue to be their priority. "In 2010 Rescue Union nearly purchased the Village J Lot H parcel for \$3.2 million," said Albaugh.

"This is a great investment for taxpayers and our school district," added Swart. "We have a plan for improving all of our schools. We also have a responsibility to secure a school site that won't be available in 10 years."

Swart said the district "won't walk away" from the Bass Lake property, adding, "We believe it is a valuable community asset and will continue to work with all involved entities to ensure this unique area is preserved for use by future generations of El Dorado Hills residents."

Albaugh said the timeline to build a new school is usually a minimum of five years.