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MANZANITA MONTESSORI SCHOOL UPDATE

I have recently been informed by the Manzanita Montessori Charter School (MMCS) Board of Directors that “the Charter School is unable to accept the District’s conditional offer of a waiver of zoning and land use regulations” for a potential school site at 295 Shiloh Road. They state they will “continue to explore other options for opening the Charter School”. Our district office has received many inquiries regarding this, with many believing the decision was one made by our School Board. MMCS representatives submitted a charter school proposal which asked for approval as an “Independent” charter school. “Independent” meaning they would have their own School Board and our district would provide some oversight. As such, all decisions regarding the charter school are made by the MMCS Board; not the WUSD School Board. The following provides additional information regarding the process which has occurred in the past school year.

The Windsor Unified School District (WUSD) School Board approved the MMCS in the fall of 2014 with a designated 2015-16 school start-up date. The approval came with a contingency that MMCS be located within the WUSD student boundary. The Board had a strong desire that the school be located within our school district boundary to provide an additional educational alternative for Windsor parents and children. This past May, MMCS notified our Board that they had located a piece of property off Shiloh Road and provided a schematic drawing of the school and a timeline for building the site. During this meeting, concerns with the provided timeframe for project completion to begin school on time and for student safety were expressed by District and Town of Windsor representatives. MMCS representatives expressed belief that the aggressive timeline was doable.

During a WUSD School Board meeting in June, 2015 MMCS representatives asked the WUSD Board to approve a waiver of Town of Windsor zoning fees and also an approval for MMCS to act as their own Lead Agency for the site building project. During this meeting, the District's legal counsel and Town of Windsor representatives expressed a belief that MMCS could not serve as their own Lead Agency. An MMCS representative differed with this opinion, thinking MMCS could be their own Lead Agency. This difference of opinion caused an initial delay in the project.

The WUSD Board approved a conditional waiver of fees in which WUSD would serve as the Lead Agency for the project. The Town of Windsor, utilizing their expertise in this area, would be designated in an advisory capacity to support WUSD. In addition, the Board noted that in the event MMCS continued to contest the Lead Agency issue, the matter should be sent to the State of California Office of Planning & Research (OPR) for a decision regarding who is the Lead Agency. If OPR decided MMCS could serve as their own Lead Agency, the WUSD Board would approve the waiver with MMCS as the Lead Agency.

MMCS representatives continued to believe they could be their own Lead Agency and the issue was sent to the OPR for a decision. While awaiting this decision, MMCS representatives asked that all work towards this project stop, pending the outcome from OPR. OPR then responded that MMCS could not be their own Lead Agency and the District was designated as the Lead Agency.

Since MMCS could not be their own Lead Agency, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) document completed for MMCS was not valid; they could not make a "finding" regarding the CEQA study because the Lead Agency (the District) is the only one authorized to do this. As a result of OPR's decision, the District needed to complete its own CEQA study for the Shiloh Road site. In an effort to move the project along and potentially save MMCS costs, the Town planning department representatives asked MMCS for the CEQA study and supporting documents so they could take the previous study into consideration when completing a new CEQA review for the District. The Town never received these documents to consider inclusion in a new CEQA study.

For clarification, the Town was not the Lead Agency for the project and, therefore, could not make any findings. It is the District, as the Lead Agency, that would consider findings and approval of the new CEQA document prior to proceeding with building on the undeveloped Shiloh Road site. It is unfortunate that representatives of the Town of Windsor are being blamed by some for MMCS not being able to open on the Shiloh Road site. Beginning with discussions in the spring of 2015, the Town articulated steps that would need to occur in proceeding with building on the Shiloh Road property. Instead, MMCS representatives chose to go another route.

Town of Windsor, MMCS and WUSD representatives all had a desire to educate MMCS students in a safe setting. District and Town representatives met several times with MMCS representatives in support of their efforts. MMCS made a good faith effort to get the school up and running for the 2015-16 school year but time became a constraint and was the eventual breaking point.

The Windsor Unified School District welcomes those students and parents who had intended to enroll their child in MMCS this fall. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.



Steve Jorgensen
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