

School wins council's hearts

*Despite neighbors' protests,
expansion gets approval*

by **Bill D'Agostino**

It wasn't so long ago that Sarah Dunn's mailbox was filled with nothing but bills. But today it's filled with college acceptance letters for her daughter, Markisha, a senior at Eastside College Preparatory High School.

Dunn's mailbox is a symbol of her family's new-found hope, as well as the dreams of a whole city, slowly blossoming.

Sarah and Markisha both came to Tuesday night's East Palo Alto City Council meeting along with more than 200 other Eastside students, parents and educators, asking the council to allow their school to expand so more students could share in Eastside's dream.

And the council heard them. It approved the new school project, 3-0, despite protests by the school's neighbors. Two council members had to abstain from the vote: Sharifa Wilson is an Eastside parent and Donna Rutherford lives near the school.

In a city where 50 percent of students drop out of high school, Eastside is a unqualified success. All of its graduates have gone on to four-year colleges, including Columbia, Stanford and other prestigious schools. Most of the kids are the first in their family to go to college.

Eastside's buildings are filled to capacity, teaching more than 100 students, mostly from East Palo Alto, in grades 6 through 12.

Eastside's founder and principal Chris Bischof said the new construction would allow his student body to grow to 165, reducing the number of students the school has to turn away — which in the past has been nearly one student for each acceptance. Last year, 75 students applied for only 48 spots.

In addition to the new classrooms, a new theater, cafeteria, science labs, soccer field and dormitories will also be built. The new dormitories will house 80 students, mostly those who have unstable living situations. Some seniors hoping to have a gradual adjustment into college living will also stay there, Bischof said. Currently, a few students sleep

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Shannon Savage

Students take an outdoor break Thursday afternoon at Eastside Prep. The school wants to expand its 22,000-square-foot Pulgas Avenue campus to more than 130,000 square feet.

East Side Prep

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in friends' or teachers' homes.

Bischof, a Stanford graduate, opened the school in 1996 hoping to provide free high-quality education to East Palo Alto kids.

By all accounts, he has succeeded. No classroom at Eastside is larger than 15 students. Private funders furnish full scholarships for all the students.

A typical school day runs from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. but students told the council they often stayed even later to work on projects, to compete in athletics and, in the words of one student, because it's "an open and safe place for us to be."

Prior to the council's approval of the expansion — which occurred 20 minutes after midnight, with many of the students and parents still in attendance, wearing stickers displaying their school's Panther logo — students got a five-hour civics lesson, East Palo Alto-style.

A small handful of neighbors expressed their concern that the new large buildings would encroach upon their neighborhood and create more traffic and noise

on their streets. The campus — located on Pulgas Avenue — is currently only 22,000 square feet but will increase to more than 130,000 square feet once construction is completed.

Domingo Huerta, one of the neighbors who opposed the school's expansion, said he will be adversely affected by living across from the new administration building. "It's beautiful to make your dream come true — but at the expense of your neighbors?" Huerta said. "That's not fair."

Huerta left the meeting more than an hour before the vote had been cast, saying he already knew the council was going to approve the expansion despite the protests, based on how they reacted earlier in the meeting. "It's sad that the City Council already made up their minds," Huerta said as he walked away from City Hall.

Later in the meeting Councilwoman Myrtle Walker said she was not simply rubber-stamping her approval. "I spent time on that campus," she said. "It's a Godsend, let me tell you."

In a night of passionate speeches extolling the school's virtues, Walker gave the climactic one.

"This is the best thing that happened to us at this moment," she said, favorably comparing the school to the Ravenswood City School District, where she served on the board for nine years.

Ravenswood is still focused on structures, she said. Eastside is focused on education.

Mayor Duane Bay acknowledged that the city was asking the neighbors to bear a burden, albeit an "acceptable and bearable burden on behalf of the community."

Of all the hits the city has taken in the past, none was as damaging as the closing of the city's last high school, Ravenswood High School, in 1976, Bay said.

Parent Fidel Haynie — whose son Derrick is a sophomore at Eastside — pointed out that so much attention in East Palo Alto is given to the violence, the drug-dealing and the political strife in City Hall.

Rather than sacrificing their lives for drugs, the community residents should be proud to sacrifice for their children, Haynie said. Eastside "is the positive thing coming out of East Palo Alto." ■

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