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MAKING WAVES IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

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City set to close escrow on Shores property

By Bianca Kaplanek

DEL MAR — After being urged to “seize the opportunity,” and “be visionary,” City Council voted 4-0, with Mayor Dave Druker recused, to move forward and close escrow by May 15 on a 5.3-acre site owned by Del Mar Union School District.

Bounded by Camino del Mar, Ninth Street and Stratford Court, the property was home to the district’s first school, Del Mar Shores Elementary, which closed in 1975. It now houses district administrative offices, recreational areas and, for the past 20 years, the private Winston School for students with learning difficulties.

With a commitment from a community-based fundraising group, the city entered into a purchase agreement with the district in July 2007. Escrow was extended until February 2008, giving the Campaign for Del Mar Shores seven months to raise the \$8.5 million purchase price. When that deadline arrived, only about \$5 million had been secured, so an

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extension was granted.

With the final deadline looming, and facing the possibility of losing what Councilwoman Crystal Crawford called the last remaining open space within city limits, council held a special session April 14 to solicit public input and determine whether city resources should be used to help in the fundraising efforts.

Nearly three dozen speakers addressed the council, including Winston School students, parents and administrators, members of

the Campaign for Del Mar Shores and residents including Kim Fletcher, whose grandfather was the original property owner. Like several speakers and council members, Fletcher offered a reminder that other city purchases, such as Powerhouse Park, were contentious but ultimately rewarding. “Let’s make this another thing we can all be proud of,” he said.

Although seemingly everyone who spoke at the meeting supported the acquisition, some were concerned about the financial risk to the city, especially with other projects in need of funding.

“(There) are scarce resources for public needs in this community,” resident Jill McDonald said. “We have a crumbling City Hall that needs to be redone. We have a public restroom and a lifeguard tower that I personally find to be a disgrace to this community. I do think (there is) the need for fiscal prudence on the part of this City Council.”

Winston School, which has already raised more than \$1.4 million, agreed to provide at least 35 percent of the funding because it occupies one-third of the property. In turn, the city will provide a long-term lease, making it easier for the school to secure funding for much-needed improvements.

A full site inspection by city officials April 14 revealed the Winston School buildings weren’t the only ones with maintenance issues. David Scherer, director of public works, said everything on the property — from buildings and landscaping to playground equipment — had been poorly maintained, a fact that didn’t sit well with Councilman Henry Abarbanel.

“The one thing that really upsets me ... is that the Del Mar Union School District has acted as its own slumlord, and they’re try-



SHORES SITE City Council voted April 14 to move forward with the purchase of this 5.3-acre lot at Camino del Mar and Ninth Street. Many of the almost three dozen speakers who addressed council at the special session called the site “a real gem.” Photo by Bianca Kaplanek

ing to get us to pick up that responsibility,” he said.

Once escrow closes, the Campaign for Del Mar Shores will have one year to raise the \$3.5 million shortfall. If it doesn’t, the city will be liable. But campaign representatives said people may be more apt to donate now that the deal is moving forward.

“When escrow closes and there is more certainty, it will really help our fundraising efforts a lot,” said Laura DeMarco, chair of

the Friends of Del Mar Parks Committee.

“I don’t feel that anyone should be discouraged that we didn’t raise (\$8.5 million) in seven months,” said Fundraising Coordinator Barbara Mandel Pache, who noted that a capital campaign is generally a multiyear effort. “The will of the community is strong, and I believe we can raise all of the money.”

Should the fundraising campaign fall short, the city has some financial options, including selling another city asset such as the Balboa lot or using a bond. Both were supported by residents and council members who will consider placing a bond issue on the November ballot.