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CALIFORNIA AND THE WEST

Proposed School Site Stirs Bitter Debate Over Safety of Poor Students

■ Education: The Watsonville parcel is near a dump, airport, cattle feedlot and sprayed fields.

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WATSONVILLE, Calif. — Dan Hernandez stands on a bluff overlooking the site of a proposed high school in this Latino farming community and grits his teeth.

He points to an old Army trash dump and county jail that sit just down the hill. He motions to the planes that drone overhead after taking off from a small airport less than a mile away. And he winces at the mixture of odors from a nearby cattle feedlot, an adjacent solid waste landfill and the chemicals sprayed on surrounding strawberry fields.

But what Hernandez and others resent most about Harkins Slough, the marshy expanse along which officials plan to build a new school for mainly low-income students, is the distinct whiff of "dirty politics."

"Do you smell that?" the 44-year-old father of two asks, gesturing toward a clutch of cows in the distance. "It's bad, really bad. How could they approve this? Would you want your kids to go to any school built here?"

The question of where to build the

district's third high school has divided this community of 44,000 located 100 miles south of San Francisco — prompting petition drives, accusations of racism and tension among school officials.

Officials say the New Millennium high school is critically needed to ease overcrowding on the district's two aging campuses, which handle nearly double their combined capacity of 3,200 students.

They say there are no alternative sites in the two-county, 156-square-mile district dominated by agricultural fields and new housing tracts. Facing a looming deadline to use \$48 million in state school construction funds, they already have spent eight years and \$9 million just to find this site. Officials say they have nowhere else to turn.

Most important, they say, despite the qualms voiced by a few activists, the Harkins Slough project enjoys strong support among residents — who are 75% Latino — and has passed rigorous state tests designed to weed out inappropriate school locations.

"We've done everything right by the book," said Terry McHenry, an associate superintendent of the Pajaro Valley Unified School District. "We're not some big developer trying to do something we're not supposed to do. All we want to do is look after our kids. And nobody in the know will tell you that this is a bad site for a school."

But in approving the site, some officials admit problems remain, with one backhandedly saying the location "didn't

stink too bad." New Millennium also is listed on a national report of toxic school sites compiled by a nonprofit environmental group.

The school project has stirred local activists, says Sylvia Previtali, whose Committee for a Safe High School Site is battling to stop New Millennium's proposed opening in the fall of 2003.

"They couldn't have picked a worse spot for a school," said the retired English teacher. "It's just an awful place for kids. The rest of the nation is looking at us and saying 'Are you nuts?'"

Activists claim that local officials have hidden motives for choosing Harkins Slough, which is west of busy U.S. 101. They say the school will open the door to future development west of the highway, now fraught with state restrictions because it lies within California's environmentally sensitive coastal zone.

In an important step, the state Coastal Commission last year voted to allow Watsonville to rewrite its local coastal plan to accommodate the high school.

"This school is a Trojan horse to urban sprawl," said George Jammal, chairman of the local Sierra Club, which has considered filing suit over the project, citing environmental racism. "If these students were middle- or upper-class, they wouldn't have dared locate this school at such a substandard site."

City Councilman Rafael Lopez scorned



that suggestion.

"The assumption the city is making secretive moves to place kids in danger for some later development payoff is ludicrous," he said. "Why would anyone want to endanger a community's children?"

In exchange for the support of some environmental groups, Watsonville agreed to a deal fashioned by Assemblyman Fred Keeley (D-Santa Cruz). The agreement precludes the city from developing west of U.S. 101.

But critics claim that after a school is built, officials will push on with their development plans.

"Imagine the breadth of the conspiracy these people are alleging, including all the state agencies that approved these lands," Lopez said. "Imagine what kind of cover-up that would be. It's crazy."

State investigators say the new school site has, indeed, passed its test.

"This site has been approved by numerous state agencies in a process that's not easy to survive," said John Dominguez, a field consultant for the state Department of Education. "This is not something the state takes lightly."

But critics — including one school board member — point to the site's inclusion in a recent report of 15 schools nationwide that have been proposed or built on dangerous land.

"Poisoned Schools: Invisible Threats, Visible Actions," published by a Washington, D.C., nonprofit, says the Watsonville site "would put low-income students of color in a school isolated in an industrial commercial/agricultural zone far from most of their homes."

New Millennium is one of only two sites in California to make the list compiled by the Center for Health, Environment and Justice. The other was the former Belmont Learning Complex project in Los Angeles, which had been proposed for an abandoned oil field poisoned with methane.

Lois Gibbs, the nonprofit's executive director, who once helped close a school at Love Canal in upstate New York after learning it was built over a toxic dump, said the group planned further study of the Watsonville school, which will be between 70% and 90% Latino.

"This site seems to fit a national trend showing a connection between the quality of

a school site and the income and race of the community," she said. "The more color, the more risk there is. To say this is the ideal place for a school is a bit hard to imagine."

School board member Sandra Nichols is troubled over New Millennium's proximity to a toxic dump and cattle feedlot. But what scares her most is the airport, where planes take off toward the school site. Recently, a helicopter flight instructor based at the Watsonville airport crashed his craft less than a mile from the school site. He and a student died.

"That school is going to be like a target for those planes," said Nichols. One of only a few board members to publicly criticize the site, she said the board vote was taken in 1992, before she took office.

"They've done studies showing where crashes happen at airports of this size — they call it the splatter pattern. And this school will be right in it," Nichols said. "To me, that's just horrifying. It flies in the face of logic."

Countered McHenry: "We're talking a small general aviation airport here, not San Jose International. Half the town is within two miles of this airport."

A state transportation official gave the site lukewarm approval.

"We flew all the traffic patterns and approaches and the site passed the basic sniff test; it didn't stink too bad," said Austin Wiswell, chief of the Caltrans Division of Aeronautics, who said the agency will not oppose the school. "I just don't like the area, for reasons that have nothing to do with airplanes," he added, declining to elaborate.

Because of design changes ordered by Caltrans and the state Coastal Commission, the school's original 70-acre site has been reduced by nearly two-thirds, to 25.5 acres. Activists point to numerous comparable sites — far from commercial and agricultural land — on which to build a school.

"It's just not the best site for a school; there are too many red flags," said Dan Carl, a local planner for the Coastal Commission, which still must approve the plans. "The chance for litigation is high, and it could delay things for years."

School proponents say 10,000 residents signed a petition supporting the project, including members of Watsonville's Latino community. Critics say many parents of the school's 2,200 target students are local fieldworkers who cannot speak English and

probably did not know what they signed.

"Many Latinos don't even know where the school is going to be built," said Previtali. "And those who do, by culture and tradition, believe in the government. They're going to let the school district make the call no matter what."

School proponents have made their own claims of racism.

"For these people to assume that the Latino community is so ill-informed and isn't smart enough to follow the project is just plain racist," Councilman Lopez said.

Added McHenry: "The people causing all the trouble are all white retirees with no kids in school. Put some perspective on this."

For now, Dan Hernandez wants to join an outreach by the Sierra Club's environmental justice office to ensure that local Latinos get the real story. A former project supporter, he's gotten a real education on local school politics.

"Once you wake up," he said, "you can't go back to sleep."

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School Site Under Attack

Activists accuse Watsonville school officials of environmental racism over plans to build New Millennium high school on a site flanked by potential hazards. Most students will be Latino. School and state officials say the site is safe.

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Activists cite potential hazards nearby:

* 1. Watsonville airport: Planes fly over the school site as they use the facility. Two people died in a recent helicopter crash less than a mile away. Caltrans performed tests and ruled the site acceptable.

* 2. Cattle feedlot: There are odor problems, and airborne viruses and pathogens from manure and dust raised by cattle could endanger students.

* 3. Landfill: Ocean breezes could spread pathogens and contaminated material onto school site.

* 4. Strawberry fields: Ocean breezes could spread potentially harmful pesticides onto school site.

* 5. Industrial zone: An aluminum plant, cold storage lockers and truck driving training facility are less than a mile south of school site. Many students would have to walk through area to reach school.

