

July 2008

Dear TUSD Community:

In the spring of 2005, the Tustin Unified School District began exploring how to construct a completely new high school on the former Tustin Marine Base. Many issues were raised, including concerns about the suitability of the site, i.e., contamination, and the availability of sufficient funding. Together with the City of Tustin, TUSD explored the possibility of rezoning the current Tustin High School site to a mix of commercial and residential use in hopes that some form of a "forward sale" of the current Tustin High School site to the developer would provide the bulk of the money for the construction of the new high school on the Base.

In the last three years, TUSD has financed the necessary environmental testing to assure the suitability of each of the three school sites on the former Marine Base, and has received approval from the State of California on the environmental requirements on all sites. However, the significant downturn in the real estate and mortgage markets, which began two years ago, has dealt two blows to our plans.

First, all of the experts agree it is highly unlikely there is any feasible zoning for the current Tustin High School land which will result in sufficient funding to construct a new high school under the current real estate market conditions. Furthermore, no one is able to provide any assurance that market conditions will become sufficiently favorable in the foreseeable future.

Second, the real estate slowdown has significantly delayed residential construction on the Base, and TUSD has no assurance of when sufficient residential demand and infrastructure, i.e., streets, utilities, etc., could be in place to begin construction on a school. The current projection by the city is the second half of 2009.

Additionally, with our continued growth, at some time in the future a fourth high school may be necessary. We believe smaller, more reasonably sized high schools are inherently superior learning environments. In the last five years, the high school population in TUSD has grown by 1,579 students or nearly 34% and overall student population by 2,331 or almost 13%. Our enrollment has grown for 10 years straight. When building resumes on the Marine Base, 2,104 single-family homes will be built. The Orchard Hills development at Portola Parkway and Culver Drive will build 2,300 homes and apartments. There is every reason to expect student growth in the future. This means that both the current Tustin High and a future high school on the Base will be a necessity.

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Meanwhile, as essential health and safety improvements have been made to Tustin High School, each year hundreds of Tustin High students graduate from a 50-year-old school facility which is in substantial need of renovation and improvement. The best information received from both financial and real estate experts says the wait for conditions under which a new high school could be built will be long and uncertain. There is no option but to begin preparation for a substantial investment to modernize the current Tustin High School facilities.

Tustin Unified has engaged NTD Architects to develop a master plan that considers all of the program and facility needs of Tustin High School. Students, parents, teachers, staff, alumni, neighbors and the community had opportunities to participate at various meetings to provide input into the master planning process. The final draft of the Tustin High Master Plan was recently adopted by the TUSD Board of Education. Based on the master planning work done so far by NTD, the Board believes we can begin to implement Phase One improvements at the current Tustin High site. Those could be accomplished within a reasonable amount of time and financed with the last segment of Measure G funds. Both the Tustin High and Foothill High master plans will require additional bond funding to complete additional phases.

The experience gained in the master planning process, and the clear-cut needs of both Tustin and Foothill high schools will certainly exceed our current financial resources. We are committed to our students, families, employees and taxpayers to carefully prioritize the use of funds we can make available, and to diligently explore options for securing additional financial resources to meet more of our secondary school facility needs.

The Tustin Unified School District has exceptional schools. Parents move to Tustin for its world-class schools and wonderful small-town appeal. This is reflected in both the high level of community support for our schools and our high property values. By any measure, our 27 Tustin Unified schools and 20,800 students have been very successful. Consider, in just the last five years, we have been honored 18 times by the California Department of Education with California Distinguished School awards and three times by the U.S. Department of Education with National Blue Ribbon School awards. Over 90% of our high school seniors go on to college.

We invite you to become active with us, in both the master planning process and in the exploration of future financial options so that we can strengthen the education of the Tustin school district students and the economic value of the neighborhoods in which we live.

Sincerely,

The TUSD Board of Education