



Emeryville Center of Community Life: City and school district collaboration

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Something unique is happening in Emeryville, California. In this 1.2 square mile city by the bay, the school district, the city, community members, and local businesses are working jointly to craft a redevelopment plan that puts education at the heart. Everyone is coming together around a shared vision of a strong city school system with high performing students, readily available community and social services, and the physical redevelopment of the existing school sites and its adjacent property along the city’s main north-south street corridor. Such a vision necessitates “out-of-the-box” thinking, overcoming decades of distrust between different groups, and crafting a creative atmosphere that enables diverse stakeholders to come together and envision what could be. As of 2005, no ground has yet been broken, but the groundwork is being laid for the vision currently called the *Center of Community Life* – a project that will be mixed-use, centrally located, and provide a variety of services and opportunities for children, families, and adults in the City of Emeryville, the Emery Unified School District (EUSD), and adjoining Oakland neighborhoods.

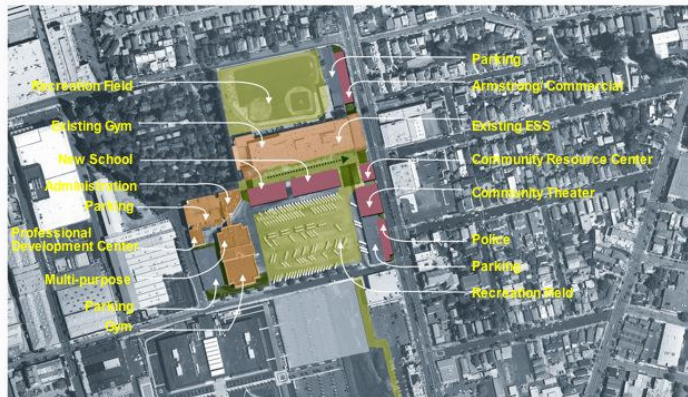
Background Following poor student performance and an impending fiscal crisis, EUSD was taken over by a state administrator in 2001. For EUSD, this was the catalyst for a variety of changes, new activity, and a great sense of optimism. An entirely new school board was elected, filled with members determined to re-think the school-community connection. Led by a committed city manager, John Flores, who feels that quality education is essential for city vitality, a creative new joint-use recreation facility lease agreement was signed. A broad coalition of stakeholders was brought together under the Emery Youth Services Advisory Committee (EYSAC) to craft a vision for turning the schools around. Following months of meetings, EYSAC recommended that the city and district work together to redevelop the schools and the adjacent parcels into a vibrant, mixed-use community center to serve all people in Emeryville. Influential business leaders in the city got involved too – they and the Chamber of Commerce publicly supported a successful parcel tax vote to raise desperately needed money for the school district.

Emeryville: At the Forefront

In Emeryville, the city and the school district are looking at their schools as essential aspects of community infrastructure to create vibrant, healthy communities that benefit children, families, neighborhoods, and the whole city. This framework exemplifies the national “schools as centers of community” movement, supported by such groups as the BEST (Building Educational Success Together) Initiative at the 21st Century School Fund and the American Architectural Foundation’s Great Schools by Design Initiative. These ideas follow former U.S. Department of Education Secretary Richard Riley’s stance that “we must re- envision schools as community learning centers” and “put aside the old factory model of education that too often isolated the school from the community.”

“The Center for Cities & Schools sees the Emeryville Center of Community Life as proof-positive for innovative, collaborative policy making,” says Deborah McKoy, the Center’s director. “The city and the school district are actively working to bridge the longstanding disconnect between public education and urban environments that is pervasive in so many locales.” Rarely do cities and schools systematically coordinate and plan together for community land use and service needs. As a result, many see this as a great missed opportunity. Tony Smith, Emery’s Superintendent states, “We are looking to transform the traditional narrow notion of school into an opportunity learning space for all ages – one that is intergenerational and flexible to meet the community and city’s needs now and in the future.” As the schools as centers of community movement gains momentum across the country, Emeryville is proving to be a ground-breaking exemplar.

An early design:



scenario a-1: ac transit site

7/28/04

The Project The *Center of Community Life* is envisioned on a nearly 20 acre site along the main thoroughfare of San Pablo Avenue. Currently, the site consists of the existing middle and high schools, a few private businesses, and a bus storage and repair facility for AC Transit, the region's bus service. Very nearby is also the Early Child Development Center and the district's one elementary school. The site is mostly surrounded by the city's residential neighborhoods. With negotiation moving forward to relocate AC Transit, the possibilities for redevelopment open wide. EYSAC is continuing its conversations, enlarging the coalition, and envisioning

new "green" school facilities, community health and service support centers, joint-use recreation facilities, as well as the desire to include private businesses and retail, possibly a fire or police station, as well as mixed-income housing to create a place that is diverse, vibrant, and a lived "center of community." As Superintendent Tony Smith states, "We're really pushing the idea of a full-service community school, creating a center of community life, that fosters density and close relationships to make this city more livable – and energizing for children and families."

Into the Future Emeryville is actively pursuing important questions about schools and revitalization, and bridging the "cities and schools disconnect" by building coalitions to find solutions. The school district, the city, businesses, and residents agree: to improve both the schools and the city, they must all work together to create a place that serves as the community's thriving center. Education – lifelong education – must be at the center of that vision. As school board member Josh Simon puts it, "We don't want to just build the Center of Community Life. We want to *be* the center of community life and then build a building around what we are." To do so, he states, "involves an interaction between programs and design...and a great deal of ongoing conversation." John Flores notes, "I'm doing this work because I'm deeply concerned about the state of public education in California and across the country, especially in urban areas. The whole city-school relationship needs to be rethought. We have the opportunity to be innovative and work with the school district to develop a community. What is a community without its kids?"

Emeryville joins others in collaborative "out-of-the-box" thinking:

Pomona, California

The local school district purchased a depressed mall and turned it into a community center with two schools, retail space for service-oriented businesses and community organizations such as HeadStart, and a local history museum.

San Diego, California

In the densely populated City Heights neighborhood, the school district, the city, a redevelopment agency, and a local foundation have collaborated to site a new school as a joint-use development containing affordable housing, a commercial/retail component as well as municipal service providers and two joint-use play fields.

Roseville, California

The school district and the city sited a new suburban high school near existing homes on a main transportation thoroughfare that incorporates extensive joint-use recreational facilities including an aquatics center and a sports center for the community.