

We don't need no education

A new secondary school proposed for Alexandra Park has received a mixed response from local principals and residents. NADIA TOLICH, PETE THORNTON and RIDMA MENDIS investigate.

Auckland's population growth has placed serious pressure on secondary schools in the central city, with some saying the area is facing an educational crisis. But a Ministry of Education proposal to build a new school at Alexandra Park has met strong opposition from a concerned community.

Auckland's 1.25 million people make up one-third of the New Zealand population. The region grows by 49 people per day, with a total of 18,000 people moving to the area each year.

The Auckland Regional Council predicts that over the next 50 years the population of the central city will double to 300,000 people, 10% of whom will be of high school age. With central Auckland becoming increasingly densely populated, secondary schools in the area will be unable to cope with the growing numbers.

In 1999 the Auckland City Council proposed that the Ministry of Education purchase land for a future school development.

According to Brenda Radford, a network provision manager at the Ministry of Education in Auckland, the only "green" land available at that time was a carpark at the back of Alexandra Park in Epsom.

The Ministry's successful \$6 million bid included lease of the middle of the trotting track for recreational use and parking by the school for 100 years.

Construction is planned to start in 2006, although the site cannot be developed until the Ministry gets consent under the Resource Management Act. An elected board of trustees will then consider zoning and enrolment in consultation with the community. If the ARC grants consent for the school, residents will still be able to appeal to the Environment Court.

The Ministry of Education is aware the development is a cause of friction in the community. But the proposed school is a matter of educational growth, Ms Radford says, not a matter of personal priority. She says residents are thinking more about their house prices than the needs of the community.

Ms Radford suggests a barrier to the new school is the community's "fear of the unknown".

Helen Clare of the Alexandra Park Residents Action Group (APRAG) disagrees: "It is the fear of the known actually. This issue has directly hit us and we are living amongst it".

The first APRAG meeting attracted 170 people. They outlined their main concerns: health and safety, traffic which is notoriously bad around the proposed site, and the site's suitability for a school.

The three hectare site is situated on Campbell Crescent. Students would be able to enter the school



PHOTO: PETE THORNTON

SCHOOL: A carpark behind Alexandra Park in Epsom is the site of a controversial proposed new secondary school. The Ministry of Education's \$6 million deal for the space includes access to the trotting park for the school's recreational activities.

from there, as well as from Manukau Rd and via an underground tunnel from Greenlane East.

APRAG committee member Helen Yensen says the proposed school will make travel harder for doctors moving between Greenlane and Auckland hospitals.

"The chaotic conditions of traffic in this region compromise health and safety," says Mrs Yensen.

"Manukau Rd, Market Rd and Greenlane East are all key access routes between the CBD, airport and hospitals."

Ms Radford says information about the planned type of school will be revealed once resource consent has been achieved.

Epsom residents are concerned that the proposed school will increase traffic congestion and parking problems, and impact on Cornwall Park's environment.

Ms Yensen, who is also a former secondary school teacher, is concerned the school will be too large for the site and that access will be a problem.

"Tunnels are very difficult to keep an eye on; they are not a safe access. With Trotting Club functions there will be all sorts of noise and activity. I hate to think what it would be like trying to control a class in that environment," she says.

ARC traffic flow studies show that average hourly morning traffic flow in Greenlane West is more than 2500 vehicles and the average traffic flow during weekdays is more than 22,000. Greenlane transport improvements that started last year are scheduled to take five years to complete.

Ms Yensen says although the school is aimed at students within walking distance, some parents will not let their children walk to school with a heavy book load, in peak hours or in bad weather conditions. She says a lack of space for student parking could lead to vehicles blocking the driveways of houses and businesses.

"They should not consider building another school without solving

the problem of traffic," says Ms Yensen.

Hobson Community Board member Julie Chambers says 2000 students trampling on the grass and more vehicles accessing Cornwall Park could cause damage.

Ms Chambers says the school board would not be able to stop the "revenue-driven" Trotting Club from advertising alcohol over school grounds or running horse races during school hours.

Onehunga High School teacher Katie Longmuir thinks the functions and training at the Trotting Club could easily disturb the school activities and distract students.

"Having a school built next to a gambling club and a playground built in the middle of a racing track is strange," she says.

Ms Radford admits it is an odd location but says a wall around the school could solve the problem.

Ms Chambers says she is not sure what adverse effects digging tunnels will have on the environment but believes underground access will not be good for students' health and safety, especially after school hours.

If the school is built at Alexandra Park, it will probably take students from eastern and southern suburbs, including Remuera, Ellerslie and Greenlane.

Auckland Grammar School principal John Morris does not think it is a good idea.

"It's a poor site. It's constrictive," he says.

He says the school will only cause further traffic congestion and it will be too close to Penrose High School — a school Ms Radford from the Ministry admits is in need of major improvements.

Ms Radford says that with the \$40 million earmarked for the proposal, the ministry could possibly expand established schools in the area. But she says the schools are pushed to their limits already and not many are able to increase their rolls.

Mr Morris says Auckland Grammar's roll has increased from 1800 to 2500 over the last two

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years. He says a new school in the area is unlikely to cause a decrease in their roll but will have a significant effect on zoning.

According to Helen Paterson, a residential sales person for Barfoot and Thompson in Epsom, the community desperately needs another secondary school.

Being inside the popular "Grammar zone" — home to the decile 10 schools Auckland Boys Grammar and Epsom Girls Grammar — has a significant effect on the value of residential properties. The proposed school will not immediately have a school zone, but it is likely to in the long term.

Mrs Paterson estimates that the value of average-priced homes in the region could jump by \$100,000 if they were in the right zone.

Many in the community are concerned at the prospect of being located south of the Grammar zone and being relegated to a lower standard of education for their children.

Penrose High School is widely regarded as a possible solution to the projected excess of students. With 849 students of its maximum 1100 students, the decile 3 school is currently operating at less than 80% of its capacity.

Principal Iva Ropati believes that with its physical space and free land his school has the capacity to grow to 2000 students.

Some believe the Ministry wants a high decile co-ed school in central Auckland, similar to successful state secondary schools such as Rangitoto College on the North Shore and Avondale College in West Auckland.

Mr Ropati says the proposed \$40 million school — which will "without any doubt be a decile ten ... another Auckland Grammar" — doesn't make sense.

"It seems like a waste of tax-payers' money and resources. Penrose High School is being overlooked."

The challenge for Penrose, Mr Ropati says, is to convince the Ministry of Education that the school is able to grow and to provide high-quality education.