

MONTEREY PENINSULA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

District to reimagine its school boundaries



TESS KENNY — MONTEREY HERALD

Foothill Elementary School is one of three schools Monterey Peninsula Unified School District plans to close over the next two school years due to declining enrollment.

By Tess Kenny

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With expected school closures fast approaching and declining enrollment deep-seated in district trends, the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District is in the final stretch of reconfiguring attendance zones to best represent and accommodate the community's population as it stands now.

Discussion of changes to attendance boundaries — lines that delineate what schools students are slated to attend based on their home address — occupied the Monterey Peninsula Unified board of trustees meeting Tuesday night. The latest in a series of meetings held this semester to examine options and hear community concerns, Tuesday's update was the last before a draft defining new

attendance zones is considered by the board for approval at its final regular board meeting of the year next week.

The question lies in where will students currently attending schools set to close go once their respective campuses are shuttered.

New attendance boundaries are a consequence of choices made by the district earlier this year.

In June, the Monterey Peninsula Unified board of trustees approved a school reconfig-

uration and consolidation plan, essentially voting to close three of the district's most under-enrolled schools: Highland Elementary (1650 Sonoma Ave. in Seaside) and Foothill Elementary (1700 Via Casoli in Monterey) by the 2022-2023 school year and Walter Colton Middle School (100 Toda Vista in Monterey) by 2023-2024.

Also included in the approved plan is the creation of transitional kindergarten through eighth grade schools at La Mesa and Monte Vista elementary schools, with the proposed timeline of adding seventh grade for the 2022-2023 school year and eighth grade by 2023-2024. Within the same period, Walter Colton Middle School would slowly phase out, offering only eighth grade next school year and closing thereafter. Elementary schools across the district

have already been reconfigured to accommodate sixth graders ahead of this school year, a decision made by the board in February.

The question lies in where will students currently attending schools set to close go once their respective campuses are shuttered. Shifted attendance zones, which have been under review through regular meetings and public forums since August, are the district's answer to the issue.

Tuesday's final draft plans propose two key changes: adjusted boundaries among TK-8 schools in Monterey and Seaside.

To more evenly split the district's population in Monterey — which now stands at Monte Vista (417 students), La Mesa (455), and Foothill (198) —

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the new attendance zones would follow the natural boundary of Highway 1 and then Montecito Avenue to Laguna Grande Park/Canyon Del Rey Boulevard. This line divides students now zoned for Foothill among the two remaining schools to result in each serving around 530-570 students, Monterey Peninsula Unified Superintendent PK Diffenbaugh explained. Doing so would also stand to move Monte Vista and La Mesa closer to district averages in racial and ethnic balance, as well as those eligible for free and reduced lunch.

As for Seaside, new zones would divide current enrollment — Del Rey Woods Elementary (357), Martin Luther King Jr. School of the Arts (355) and Highland (277) — to result in approximately 507 students at Del Rey Woods and 646 at Martin Luther King, Jr. More of Highland's former students will be funneled into Martin Luther King Jr. given King's larger capacity to expand.

Barring minor qualms, plans offered at Tuesday night's public session are fairly reflective of final attendance zones the board

will vote to approve at its next meeting on Dec. 14, Diffenbaugh said. Where more debate and attention needs to be directed, he continued, is on how transitions to new campuses, especially those in the process of shifting to TK-8 sites, will be managed.

Per its most recent proposal, the district assured any student currently enrolled in an impacted school (Highland, Foothill, Colton) will be granted a transfer to their school of choice, a decision they would have to make by Feb. 25. The plan also promises the receiving schools would hold at least one open house for prospective students, as well as an orientation for new families before the 2022-23 school year.

Though the board will give a high-level approval of what direction it expects this transition to go at next week's meeting, Diffenbaugh explained the details of moving students and teachers across campuses is a developing target that will be determined more closely in the coming months.

Beyond the problem of managing school transfers, the district is likewise tasked with modernizing La Mesa and Monte Vista Elementary to accommodate middle schoolers by 2023-2024 as they welcome students from Foothill next year. A secondary responsibility of Monterey Peninsula Unified's School Reconfiguration and Consolidation Plan, the idea of modernizing while stu-

dents move into new classrooms across the district is tricky, and not something Monterey Peninsula Unified has entirely figured out.

For Monte Vista, the district imagines a three-part transition. The first step would move current Monte Vista students and any new Foothill transfers to Walter Colton's campus for the 2022-23 school year. Eighth graders at Walter Colton, the only students left at the school per the district's phase-out plan, would then finish out their middle school years on Monte Vista's campus. With additions made over the next year, the ultimate goal is to transition Walter Colton to be fully TK-8 functional by 2023-24.

The switch in location, Diffenbaugh explained, is the most cost-effective way to modernize while accounting for higher enrollment, as Monte Vista's campus is not equipped to handle a large influx of students next year and would require more additions than Walter Colton to eventually serve students up through middle school.

Parents and teachers at Tuesday night's meeting approached the proposal with concern, asking why it was necessary to uproot two different student populations, especially TK/K students accustomed to the facilities at Monte Vista. Diffenbaugh and the Monterey Peninsula Unified board of trustees pointed toward the stark contrast in cost required to modernize each school, an estimated \$20.9 million project at Monte Vista versus a \$12.5 million endeavor at Walter Colton.

The district will give some overarching guidance for the modernization process next week, but again, Diffenbaugh expects conversations to extend through the new year. For now, he and the board intend to lead a transition that incurs the least amount of disruption among all students transferring to a new school and all sites taking on new grade levels.

"We sometimes have to make difficult decisions that not everyone is happy about but are in the best interest for the district long term," said Diffenbaugh. "I'm proud of how we have handled the situation in a transparent way, and I think we're doing what's right, to the degree that you can with something this difficult."

Monterey Peninsula Unified's final draft attendance boundaries proposal can be accessed at <https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/mpusd/Board.nsf/Public>.