

SEBASTOPOL •INDEPENDENT• CHARTER SCHOOL

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Sebastopol School District Delivers Its Holiday Lump of Coal

With its recent vote to lease the Pine Crest campus to an out-of-district school on less favorable terms than were offered by an in-district school last spring, Sebastopol Union School District has displayed a disturbing short-sightedness and failure to uphold its fiscal and fiduciary responsibilities. Further, SUSD approved this controversial lease at a specially convened meeting on the Friday before Christmas, thus avoiding a repeat of the public outcry over this issue at the District's November meeting.

Because of its steadily declining enrollment and projected budget deficit of nearly \$1,000,000 by 2014, last fall the District voted to close Pine Crest. This was widely seen as a win-win opportunity, enabling the Sebastopol Independent Charter School (SICS), a District-chartered public school, to realize a long-sought unification of its separate campuses, and providing the District with much-needed revenue.

At the public bid opening last April, the District received only two offers for the site, both from SICS: one to buy the property for \$5.1 million (based on the District's own appraisal), and the other to lease it long-term.

Because of long-stated time constraints for SICS to organize a fall move, the parties had less than two weeks to negotiate the details of a deal. Though SICS expressed its willingness to pay up to \$200,000 rent per year for a longer lease term, the District would not accept any lease or use agreement beyond an initial three-year term. Nor would it agree to a long term lease extension, even when accompanied by an option for SUSD to take back the campus should it need it. The District justified its refusal on its need for "flexibility" in managing its real estate.

The District has now demonstrated its use of that flexibility. The 3-year deal just signed with Twin Hills School District leases Pine Crest to Sun Ridge Charter, an out-of-district school, for \$163,000 per year and gives the tenant the unusual option to terminate the lease on nine months notice. Less money for an uncertain term, from a school not chartered by SUSD.

Inexplicably, despite SICS submitting two new offers last month and repeatedly requesting resumed negotiations with the District, SUSD turned its back on its public duty to serve its many students attending SICS, and to achieve the best deal through competitive negotiation. SUSD negotiated exclusively and privately with an out-of-district school, leaving much-needed revenue on the table, and its own charter school out in the cold.

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It isn't just the failure to negotiate that's questionable about the District's action. Once any charter within its boundaries has 80 in-district students, state law requires a district to provide facilities to house those students. By inviting in another charter, the District will increase its facilities obligations and thereby decrease its rental income. And that fiscal drain will continue to grow over time as Sun Ridge pursues its goal of significantly expanding, which will have the combined effect of drawing enrollment (and state financing) from District-run schools, and requiring SUSD to provide ever more space to another district's charter school.

But wait, it gets worse. Later this year, SUSD plans to ask voters to approve a multi-million dollar bond measure to support its capital facilities.

The dismal take-away: in order to keep property it determined it doesn't need, and facing a devastating budget deficit, Sebastopol Union School District has rejected millions of dollars offered by one of its own public schools. It has ignored its legal and ethical obligations to serve its own in-district school, and brought in an out-of-district school that will further stress its finances. Finally, it will soon ask district residents to pay more taxes to support this folly. A lump of coal indeed for the whole community.

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