

Tragic past, uncertain present, bright future of Cleveland Elementary

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By Jeff Clemetson | Editor

Next month will mark the 37th anniversary of one of San Carlos' most infamous moments — the Cleveland Elementary School shooting. While national tragedies of school shootings persist today and remind residents of that event, there will soon be one less symbol of it — the school itself.

In January 2015, San Diego Unified School District voted to put the Cleveland Elementary property up for sale. Because of declining enrollment, the district had not operated a school there since 1983.

Last June, Preface, LLC and JCR Capital bought the 8.76-acre property located at 6365 Lake Atlin Ave. for \$5.8 million and plan on building homes there. Preface is an experienced builder that has developed many residential and mixed-use projects throughout the area, including the Rancho Dorado homes in San Marcos and Hidden Trails homes in Escondido.



The developers of the Cleveland Elementary site plan to relocate the plaque and flagpole that memorialize the victims of the 1979 school shooting there.

(Photo by Jeff Clemetson)

The proposed project, which is still in the planning and approval phase, is a community of around 50 well-designed and well-built homes that will comply with existing zoning and the community plan. The development's roadway will be maintained by the HOA.

"It is very rare to find an infill project with traditional lot sizes [minimum of 5,000 square feet], so we think this project will be appealing to families that are looking for new homes with large yards, but want to remain close to all the amenities that the City of San Diego has to offer," said Ted Shaw, a consultant for the Atlantis Group who is working with Preface in getting the project approved.

When the project is completed, it will be a brighter chapter in the story of the Cleveland Elementary school site, which became infamous for being home to the first modern school shooting.

The tragedy of Jan. 29, 1979, started at 8:30 a.m., when 16-year-old Brenda Spencer began firing a .22-caliber rifle toward the elementary school campus from her home, located directly across the street.

When asked by the San Diego Evening Tribune why she did it, Spencer was famously quoted as saying, "I don't like Mondays. This livens up the day." That quote was used as the basis for the 1981 song written by Bob Geldof for The Boomtown Rats called, "I Don't Like Mondays."

Wragg and Suchar both died at the scene and nine others were injured — eight students and a police officer. After a standoff that lasted several hours, Spencer surrendered to SWAT team officers. She was eventually sentenced to 25 years to life in prison and is up for parole again in 2019.

If she is released, the school she terrorized that day in 1979 may already be replaced with new homes and families.

The homes that are planned for the Cleveland Elementary project will range from approximately 2,400 to 2,900 square feet with up to five bedrooms and four bathrooms. All of the homes will feature large open-concept great rooms and a downstairs bedroom to accommodate multi-generational living.

Shaw said the project is waiting approval from the city, but he anticipates that "construction could commence as early as late 2016."

Construction will certainly have to wait until at least June of 2016. Currently, the school site is home to the Magnolia Science Academy charter school. Although the school's lease expires at the end of this school year, Magnolia administrators are hoping to stay at the site while they search for a replacement site for the bungalow-style school.

“We’d like to give our families some certainty,” said Dr. Caprice Young, CEO of Magnolia Public Schools. “We need one more year and [Preface’s] entitlements should take that long.”

Magnolia has been using the Cleveland Elementary site since 2005. It serves around 400 children and is known to be one of the higher-performing schools in the county. Magnolia had hoped to buy the site from the district but the deal fell through, Young said.



PLAN 1A



PLAN 1B



PLAN 2A



PLAN 2B



PLAN 3A



PLAN 3B

Conceptual drawings of the single-family homes that will occupy the Cleveland Elementary school site. (Courtesy of the Atlantis Group)

“We are looking at every possible option,” Young said, adding that the school district has recommended a few sites.

Though talks are ongoing between Magnolia’s and Preface’s attorneys about extending the use of the property to the school while the permit-approval process continues, there is no agreement in place yet.

“Our families are not going to stand for it,” Young said. “If we have to move [before a new school site is found], our students are going to go to class in Preface’s offices.”

Shaw remains hopeful of an agreement and said there is still a chance the lease will be extended for up to one entire school year, but it all depends on how Magnolia’s hunt for a new school plays out.

“My client is in support of helping [Magnolia] find a location and is happy to work with them,” he said. “If they struggle to find a place it would become more difficult for my client to keep extending the use of the site for the school.”

In addition to relocating Magnolia and its students, there is another part of Cleveland Elementary that will need to be moved — a memorial set on the school grounds to honor the victims of the shooting.

A memorial plaque and an accompanying flagpole honor the lives of principal Burton Wragg and custodian Michael Suchar, the two fatal casualties of the shooting.

“Wragg had run out of the office, directly opposite the Spencer home, to help the children who had been shot and was later followed by Suchar,” the Los Angeles Times wrote in an article following the shooting.

At the Oct. 14 meeting of the Navajo Community Planners, Shaw and Matt Hamilton, also of the Atlantis Group, promised to incorporate the memorial into the landscape design of the housing development by prominently displaying it along the front of the complex for the public to see and remember the lives lost.

"It is an important, albeit sad, symbol of what occurred so we made moving it to the corner of Lake Atlin and Lake Angela part of our plans," Shaw said.

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