

# Marin Independent Journal

## Ross Valley residents extol value of child care center

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Ross Valley residents and civic leaders testified this week in support of maintaining a children's center for low-income families at Deer Park in Fairfax.

Marin County Supervisor Katie Rice, who represents the Ross Valley, was the first of almost 40 people to speak Monday in favor of keeping the Fairfax-San Anselmo Children's Center property intact before an advisory committee of the Ross Valley School District.

"The center has been a topic of interest by Marin County for decades," Rice said before a packed crowd of more than 100 people at Wade Thomas Elementary School in San Anselmo.

"This is one of only six programs countywide for subsidized child care — and the only such provider in the Ross Valley," Rice said.

"Marin's subsidized child care capacity is nowhere near what it needs to be," she said. "We cannot afford to lose any capacity."

In addition to the passionate testimony from almost all of the speakers in favor of keeping the property as a child care center, the advisory committee also received more than 180 comments online and 200 postcards with the same message.

"I wouldn't be here without Ethel Seiderman," said Mike Bristow of Sleepy Hollow, referring to the late civic activist who founded the child care center with her husband Stan about 50 years ago.

Bristow, now a successful Marin businessman, was a toddler in 1974 when his family placed him in child care at the center for two years. He said that provided him with a strong foundation and a head start in life.

“There’s nothing that serves a more public purpose than what the Fairfax-San Anselmo Children’s Center does for our community,” he said.

The advisory committee members will use the public comments to prepare a draft recommendation to present to the school district, which owns the property. The school district has set an Aug. 31 deadline for selling the property to the center operators, who are tenants of the district.

“We will begin work on our draft, non-binding report for discussion at our next meeting a week from today,” committee member Chris Carson said. After additional review, the advisory committee will forward its final recommendation to the school district’s board of trustees later this spring, Carson said.

In addition to Rice, other public officials and community groups pledged their support for maintaining the center at the site. They included Fairfax Vice Mayor Barbara Coler, Barbara Clifton Zarate of the Marin Community Foundation and members of the Marin Organizing Committee.

“Marin Community Foundation has long been invested in youth and childhood education,” Zarate said. “The Fairfax-San Anselmo Children’s Center is a trusted partner that helps children to be strong and resilient.”

Numerous parents whose children attend the center also testified.

“We’re here because all the children deserve a child care center like this one — and a quality education,” parent Yesenia Ortiz said through a Spanish translator.

Gail Dorph of the Marin Organizing Committee said the value of supporting children extends to the whole community.

“The world exists because of the breath of small children,” she said. “When we support children, we’re supporting the existence of the world.”

Felice Faison, who attended the center as a child, came back later to work on the staff and now sends her own children there, agreed.

“There’s magic in the soil there,” said Faison, a San Anselmo resident. “There’s magic everywhere. We need to keep the center there so all children in the future can get the same magic.”

Although both Zarate and Rice indicated Monday that the county and the foundation are open to contributing financially to the repairs and renovations needed at the center property, they were not yet able to specify an amount.

“I think both of our institutions are waiting to see what the final deal will be,” Zarate said Tuesday, referring to a potential sale of the property by the school district.

The advisory committee’s process is running in parallel to a new proposal from the Marin County Office of Education to buy the center property from the school district.

John Carroll, the county superintendent of schools, said earlier this month that if the county bought the property from the school district for \$1, it would immediately extend a long-term lease to the center. At the same time, the county would enter into a major construction effort to bring the property up to current local and state code.

Carroll said Tuesday that his office is already engaged in extensive due diligence studies on environmental, structural and safety issues at the property. The county needs the studies before its board of trustees could agree to the property purchase.

“We are still a long way from knowing what the possible scope and cost of the project might be,” Carroll said. Earlier estimates have ranged from \$20 million to more than \$30 million.

The hearing Monday was the latest chapter in a saga that began a year ago. That was when district counsel Terry Tao advised trustees that the property was so deteriorated and poorly maintained that it was unsafe to

house children. Tao told trustees that they could be held personally liable if something bad happened.

He advised the trustees to evict the center operators, who are on a month-to-month lease. The trustees declined to act on that advice, instead setting up the year-long process where the district could sell the property to the center. That process has been stalled in recent weeks, however, over setting the price of the sale.

Ross Valley resident Lisa Canin criticized the school district for its handling of the discussions and meetings — some of which have invoked fear, anger and protest among families who worried the center would be evicted.

“This past year has been a time of angst and confusion that could have been avoided if the school district had set up a free exchange of community ideas early on,” Canin said. “I would ask the committee to include that recommendation early on for anything that would come up in the future.”

Meanwhile, however, with the addition of the Marin County Office of Education’s interest in the property and the overwhelming public support, center operators said they are feeling optimistic.

“I think it’s going really well,” Heidi Tomskey, center director, said after the hearing, referring to the advisory committee’s process and its handling of testimony from the public.

“We really appreciate the opportunity for this meeting for public comment,” Tomskey said. “It’s an important part of the process.”

The advisory committee meets again at 4 p.m. Monday at the district office at 110 Shaw Drive in San Anselmo.