

# *Daily Pilot*

Nature center fears housing may compromise sanctuary that served Newport Beach for generations



Environmental Nature Center Executive Director Bo Glover walks past ferns and redwoods at their campus in Newport Beach Monday. He and supporters of the refuge say potential development of multistory housing on a neighboring vacant lot may compromise the sanctuary, and are calling on the city council to remove that property from the housing element.

(Eric Licas)

By **Eric Licas** Staff Writer

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Ferns softly rustle against passing students and other visitors treading a path lined by tall, old trees. The branches of redwoods provide a canopy over part of the Environmental Nature Center in Newport Beach, shielding it from the noise of adjacent Newport Harbor High, surrounding residences and the trappings of modern life.

“That’s one of our goals here...is to give the impression that you’re not in the urban sprawl, trying to block out as much as we can of the outside world,” the nature center’s executive director, Bo Glover, told the Daily Pilot Monday.

The site features 15 different sections showcasing plants from across California’s woodlands, deserts, chaparral and forests. It was founded in the early 1970s as a project out of Newport Harbor High, transforming a campus dumping ground known as “the gulley” into a pocket paradise.

Over the years it has grown to now host around 26,000 children on field trips, summer camps and a variety of other programs each year, Glover said. That includes a unique preschool, in which its 72 enrolled students spend 80- to 90% of their time outdoors with nature as their classroom.

“Over 750,000 students have come through the ENC on programs over the years,” Glover said. “No other facility who does what we do can claim those sort of numbers in terms of the impact we’ve had and the services we’ve provided for our city.”



Kate Williams, a staff member of the preschool at the Environmental Nature Center in Newport Beach, hands rosemary to a student Monday. Supporters of the facility fear potential residential development on a neighboring property may compromise its privacy and serenity.

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He and supporters of the nature center say its mission of cultivating a refuge in suburban Newport Beach may be compromised by the potential development of multistory residences directly adjacent to the preschool. The vacant property neighboring the center has been marked in the city's housing element for the creation of new homes. In January, staff at the ENC learned a developer had expressed interest in starting a project there, Glover said.

Newport Beach's assistant city manager, Seimone Jurjis, said the party considering purchasing that vacant lot was interested in building detached single family homes that would ultimately be put up for sale. But no application for any project at that site had been submitted to the city as of Friday.

The city's housing plan would currently allow for structures of up to 65 feet in height at that location. Those could potentially be built at the top of a slope leading down to the nature center, likely blocking out the sky. That would disrupt visitors' immersion in nature, create potential privacy issues, impact the health of nearby plants and possibly lead to other unforeseen problems, Glover said.

"The ENC is such a special place and it does deserve protection," Glover said. "We're not saying that residential development isn't needed. It's obviously been identified by the state and our local cities have been underneath a mandate to provide those areas. This isn't the place for it. It just isn't."



The preschool at the Environmental Nature Center serves about 70 children. Supporters of the facility say its privacy and serenity may be compromised by potential residential development on a neighboring vacant lot. They are hoping the Newport Beach City Council will remove that property from the housing element.

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In light of concerns brought forth by supporters of the nature center, Newport Beach City Councilman Erik Weigand has raised the possibility of taking the neighboring vacant property out of the housing element. That would remove it from the inventory of sites designated for additional residential development.

The City Council will discuss the matter at their meeting Tuesday afternoon. If a majority of the dais supports the move in an unofficial straw poll it will then be added to the agenda of a future council meeting for formal consideration.



Preschoolers greet Environmental Nature Center Executive Director Bo Glover on Monday. He and other supporters of the refuge fear its serenity and privacy may be compromised by potential residential development on a neighboring vacant lot. They are asking the Newport Beach City Council to consider removing that property from the housing element.

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