

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

**Environmental Nature Center anxious for
Newport Beach council support for housing
element change**



Workers remove trees on the former Newport Bay Hospital property beside the Environmental Nature Center on E. 16th Street in Newport Beach, CA on Monday, Dec. 30, 2024. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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A Newport Beach councilmember is set to hear from his colleagues on the dias tonight, April 15, if they would support removing a 1.5-acre parcel that was once home to the Newport Bay Hospital from [the city's housing element](#).

The property along 16th Street is identified in the city's housing document as a place where commercial property owners could put through plans to build residential housing. The city has been mandated by the state to have zoning and planning in place to accommodate the development of 4,845 new homes, all of which is laid out in the housing element that was approved by the state in 2022.

The request by Councilmember Erik Weigand is a first for the City Council. Revising the housing element would take state approval.

Newport Beach's [housing element plans](#) for more than the mandated number of units allocated to the city, so some see room for removing the property, but others said they didn't think the state would take well to an effort to chip away at an approved plan.

The property shares a border with the 3-acre Environmental Nature Center, which has a preschool and hosts camps and school groups as well as community events. In January, the center reached out to Weigand for help [when the adjacent property owner removed at least 20 trees to establish a boundary line after a former survey was found to be incorrect](#).

According to his attorney at the time, the owner of the former hospital site was planning to prepare the property for sale.

"We've seen the potential buyers of the property touring the land and the buildings," said Bo Glover, CEO of the nature center, which has been operating since 1972. "The concern is at a heightened level right now. We worry what will tower over what we've done to repair the prior damage."

Concerned about the potential for a project next door, the center reached out to a variety of elected officials looking for support in discouraging high-density development.

"There are not a lot of places like this," said Katie Smith, a mother of two preschoolers who started a petition on Change.org to rally support against development of the former hospital property with high-density housing that would threaten "the safety, character, and environmental integrity of our community."

“People come from all over to come here,” she said. “The children get to be outside and learn about nature.”

The center has 72 children at the preschool daily and serves 26,000 students a year with programs and camps, Glover said.

“If you’re standing in the preschool, you can see what huge density looming over the magical preschool would be like,” she added. “I’m very curious why the city would let something like this happen.”

At the council meeting, the city clerk will take a straw vote of the council to determine whether a majority is interested in discussing in the future the question of removing the property from the housing element. There will be no council discussion at this meeting; if a majority supports it, it will go on a future agenda. But Smith and other supporters of the nature center say they still plan to attend to address the council.

According to the city’s Community Development Department, there has been no proposal for the property’s development submitted to City Hall. Efforts to reach the property owner’s attorney or a potential developer were not successful.

“When the city approved our housing element, we added a buffer that would allow us the ability to remove housing sites, if needed,” Weigand said. “This is a situation where a buffer can be used to protect a treasured community asset.

“When you border a preschool and location that hosts thousands of kids a week, housing is not the right fit,” he added.

“We are very appreciative and supportive of Erik’s recognition of the impact that the housing element has on us,” Glover said.

Glover said the center — which is 25 years into a 50-year lease with the Newport Mesa Unified School District — would like the “opportunity to try and raise the money to buy the property,” but since inquiring about that in October, he said he heard nothing more from the property’s owner or attorney. He said he was told then that the property owner had no interest in selling the land.

“We did that with the land for the interpretive center,” he said, “and also where the preschool is located.”