

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

**Newport Beach council majority not on board
with tweaking housing element for ENC**



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)



By **ERIKA I. RITCHIE** | eritchie@scng.com | Orange County Register
UPDATED: April 16, 2025 at 11:05 AM PDT

A request to discuss removing the 1.5-acre former home of the Newport Bay Hospital from the city's housing element died Tuesday night, April 15, lacking majority support from the Newport Beach City Council.

Councilmember Erik Weigand had asked for a straw vote of his colleagues and dozens of community members addressed the council in support. Weigand, representing the West Newport district where the property lies along 16th Street, had hoped to get support from the rest of the council to agendaize in the future a discussion about removing the property from the city document that outlines where new housing could go, given its proximity to the Environmental Nature Center.

Center staff and parents of students who attend the preschool and other programs say they are worried about the impact of "high-density development" nearby on the tranquil setting of the ENC's 3-acre site that includes a stream and a variety of ecosystems and habitats. The ENC has 72 students who attend its preschool and more than 26,000 students who participate in its camps and programs each year, its director said. It has been in operation since 1972.

The old hospital property along 16th Street is identified in the city's housing element 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 at least 4,845 new homes, all of which is laid out in the housing document that was approved by the state in 2022.

The video player is currently playing an ad.

Weigand had said that since Newport Beach's housing element plans for more units than the state required, there would have been some room for adjustments.

Neither Weigand nor other council members discussed the topic before the straw vote, but supporters of the ENC took two minutes each during public comments to ask for council support, lasting for more than an hour.

Among the approximately 45 speakers was Katie Smith, a mother of two preschoolers, who has placed a petition for council help on Change.org. By the time of the meeting, she had collected more than 1,000 signatures.

"I'm disappointed but not surprised," Smith said following the straw poll. "We knew this wouldn't be easy."

She said she and others remain committed to "pursuing the steps necessary to preserve the Environmental Nature Center and protect our children from environmental and developmental harm."

"This space is too important to give up on," she added.

Bo Glover, the ENC's executive director, said on Wednesday that he is proud of the community's outpouring of support for the center.

"I'm very disappointed in our City Council's unwillingness," he said. "This fight to protect the ENC is not over, and we are formulating the next steps starting today."

On Tuesday, William Brinckloe, Jr., the attorney for the property owners, sent a letter to the Newport Beach city attorney saying neither he nor the property owner had received notice the council would be considering an item regarding the removal of the property from the housing element.

He said the owners, the Gallant Family LLC, had previously spent \$600,000 on a plan to develop a 20,000-square-foot medical building, but when the city rezoned the property in 2024 to permit residential development, the family decided to sell the land.

"It appears the ENC wants to acquire the property and is doing everything possible to deter the development and force a sale," Brinckloe said, adding it is "unclear how the residential development would threaten the ENC."

He added it could potentially even feed more enrollment.

Brinckloe also said it is the owners' understanding the potential developer is willing to reasonably consider issues the ENC may have related to the future use of the property.

"Having spent my childhood at the ENC, as well as (having sent) my kids to the preschool, I'm convinced this housing location will disrupt the tranquility and beauty which makes this place so special," Weigand said Wednesday. "I will be looking for other options in the near future so I can help the ENC protect itself from losing its character and charm."

