

# Opening a new school: Surprise! It takes time and money

By Lori Raineri

As summer passes and another school year begins, many of California's students are attending newly constructed schools. How those schools came to be is the story of all construction projects — it takes time and money.

Gene Larrigan, Assistant Superintendent, Business Services of Yuba City Unified, has been opening Andros Karperos Middle School (Grades 6-8) since September 1991. Actually, the school has been constructed in phases, beginning with the first phase — 12 relocatable classrooms, a portable cafeteria, and a portable administrative office — completed in 1991. Unfortunately, the District had such a short time in which to bring the school into being (the Board of Trustees approved the project in March 1991), that September came and the school wasn't ready. The student body of Andros

Karperos Middle School opened their 1991-92 school year attending class in one of the District's elementary schools and a leased church school. By November, the 450 students were moved to their new school, which has been expanding ever since. One year later there were 750 students attending Andros Karperos on a year-round schedule, and today there are more than 1,000. Two more phases have been constructed, Phase II in 1993 — including 12 stick-built relocatables and a Sprung Structure, which is

similar to a circus tent, used as a multi-purpose room, with the previous relocatable cafeteria converted to a library. In February 1995, Phase III was completed when six permanent classrooms and a permanent multi-purpose room with a stage, band facility and central kitchen, were finished, and six of the original relocatable classrooms along with the Sprung Structure were moved to a new site as a starter school.

Gene says the biggest challenge was funding, but his big-

gest frustration was the timetable. "It took so long between developing the educational plan for the school and the actual construction of each phase, that there was turnover among the staff and parents, so we were constructing facilities without the complete buy-in of the people who would be using it." Gene advises bringing on the administrator of a new facility as early as possible. Yuba City Unified hired the principal of the new school three months before opening, and Gene says that if possible, it would be better

to have that principal on board a year ahead, so that he can participate in all aspects of the planning. Doug Bower, Assistant Superintendent for Business, Santa Rosa City Schools, echoes Gene Larrigan's feeling that funding was the biggest headache in constructing his district's new school, Elsie Allen High School, which opened in September 1994. However, the lack of funding caused only a one year delay for Santa Rosa, when the District changed direction and submitted a general obligation bond

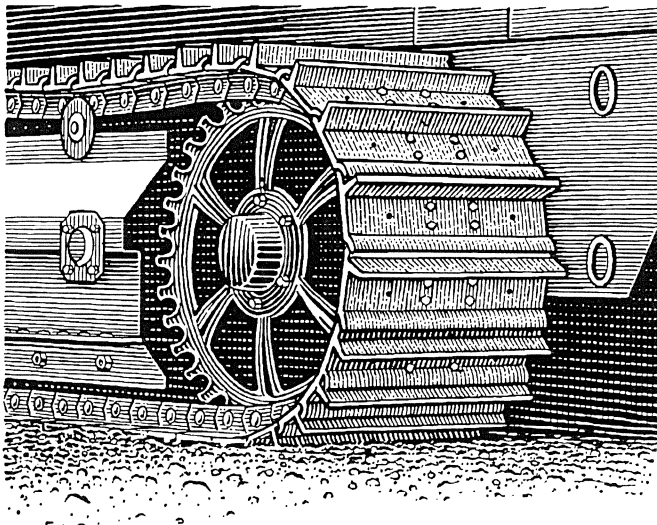
measure to its voters and was therefore able to fund 50% of the project locally, with the remainder funded by the State School Building Program. Surprisingly, another year's delay was caused by environmental concerns regarding the site selected by the District. Originally, the District intended to purchase a 53 acre high school site, but

settled for just 40 acres due to the presence of high quality wetlands on a portion of the original site; developing the full 53 acre site would have required major environmental mitigation. As it was, the District was still responsible for wetlands preservation as a result of the 40 acres it purchased. In handling the wetlands issue, Doug dealt with the State Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Army Corps of

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Engineers, among others. While the Elsie Allen High School required six years from conception to realization, when the 750 ninth and tenth graders inaugurated their new school in September 1994 spirits ran high and are still going strong with three grades at the school this year. Doug's advice to others planning a new school is to deal with environmental issues as early as possible. Environmental issues bring many new players into the process that schools are not necessarily used to dealing with; and it takes time to address everyone's differing agenda and requirements to construct a school that meets the community's needs.


Environmental concerns also posed problems for Joe Camara, Director of Facilities for the Hanford Elementary School District, during the construction of John F. Kennedy Junior High School. Originally, the District considered itself fortunate that it owned a site for a new school. The site had been purchased by the District in 1947; and after passing a general obligation bond measure in March 1993 the District was ready to move forward with the design and construction of a badly needed second junior high school. The good fortune of owning a site soon proved to be one of the biggest headaches in the process, as Joe discovered that during the 1920s a slough had run through the site and lead from cans discarded there had leaked into the ground. As did the folks in Santa Rosa, the Hanford District staff soon found itself dealing with a host of environmental agencies. Eventually, the District was able to clear all hurdles by clearing some ground, literally, and construction moved forward. Joe feels that having a good

architect, strong site drawings to reduce the need for change orders, a good general contractor, and a great job superintendent were key to meeting a tight construction timetable.

Nancy White, the District's Director of Fiscal Services, echoes Joe's sentiments about having a good team. "From the inception of planning the school, which began in 1991, right through to the school opening, we had a true team effort from our financial advisor to our construction inspector, and everyone in between, which resulted in our school being open on time as we had envisioned it." Nancy commented further that even with years of planning, opening a new school involves numerous unforeseen details that crop up daily. Nancy pointed out that a key contribution to meeting their timetable was the attention paid to working with contractors by District staff. Having a contract doesn't necessarily mean that projects will be completed on time and on budget. "Joe's ability to motivate and collaborate with people was key in all helping our contractors meet their deadlines and cost limitations." While the teamwork involved in construction of the John F. Kennedy Junior High School is something of which both Joe and Nancy are proud, they also agree that the biggest obstacle to overcome was funding.

In Los Alamitos Unified School District, Ron Murrey faced a different situation than Yuba City Unified, Santa Rosa City Schools, or Hanford Elementary. Ron needed to re-open an existing middle school that had been closed for a dozen years. Though closed by the District, the facility had been

used as a training facility by a large corporation and as classrooms space by other educational agencies in the area. Oak Middle School opened in September 1995 with 550 students, just six months after the Board of Education gave the go-ahead. Ron's biggest regret was that he didn't start early enough. Funding was a particularly unique problem for Los Alamitos, as the District was impacted by the Orange County bankruptcy and the Board was understandably reluctant to make a major fiscal decision with the financial status of the District unclear. Were Ron to open another school, he recommends a year of lead time; yet he feels the District accomplished volumes by having every classroom fully equipped and ready to go when the teachers and students arrived.

In the end, these four districts shared a frustration with funding, and in each case were forced to adjust their plans in response to the lack of funding available from the State School Building Program. However, students at the Andros Karperos Middle School in Yuba City, Elsie Allen High School in Santa Rosa, John F. Kennedy Junior High School in Hanford, and Oak Middle School in Los Alamitos are benefiting from the tremendous teamwork and effort put forth by District staff to respond to funding challenges, unforeseen logistic and bureaucratic hurdles, and the ever present ticking of the clock. Perhaps Gene Larrigan summed up best what's required to open a new school: "Work twelve hours a day." 

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