

LOCAL

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Fight over Tustin base land settled

The city gets a loan to pay Santa Ana school district \$60 million needed for construction.

By JEFF ROWE

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An eight-year dispute between the city of Tustin and Santa Ana schools is just a wire transfer of funds away from conclusion.

Tustin's City Council has agreed to give the Santa Ana Unified School District \$60 million to settle a dispute over the old Tustin Marine Corps Air Station.

Tustin officials said Monday that investment banker Solomon Smith Barney will fund the loan by Dec. 27, thus giving the district what it wanted: money to build schools to relieve crowding. Enrollment in Santa Ana schools has risen from 45,000 students in 1985 to 62,000 today.

Transfer of the funds "will provide a very Merry Christmas for all involved," said Ed Connor, a lawyer for the school district. Connor noted that the Tustin payment will be matched by the state, thus giving the district even more money toward the new high school and elementary schools it is building or planning. For

district Superintendent Al Mijares, though, the merry is tinged with worry. He fears "severe" state budget cuts may force the district to slow its construction plans.

The Santa Ana school district figured in the base reuse debate because a portion of the 1,600-acre base had come under the school district's jurisdiction. When plans were announced to close the base, the district sought 100 acres to use for new schools. It settled for 22 acres.

However, that land turned out to be too contaminated with jet fuel, solvents and other pollutants for a school.

That led to an agreement calling for Tustin to pay the district \$60 million to buy land elsewhere for schools, but the two sides disagreed over how and when the money would be paid. A court order prevented Tustin from selling any land until the issue was resolved.

In hiring Smith Barney, Tustin saved more legal fees and protracted financing costs by borrowing money to pay the school district. Tustin plans to repay the loan within 18 months with proceeds from sales of land at the former base.

"It's good to be done with it and move on with the reuse plan," said Tustin Mayor Tracy Worley. Newly installed

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Councilman Doug Davert agreed. "It's a great day for all concerned," he said.

Parents, also, are relieved.

"I'm sad we did not get the base land, but I'm glad this is over with," said Roland Lujan, a food service delivery driver and one of 100 parents of Santa Ana students who went to Sacramento this past summer to lobby for education legislation. Lujan is a 1978 graduate of Saddleback High School, which at that time accommodated all the students in 53 classrooms. His daughter attends the school now, learning in some of those same rooms - and in the 64 temporary classrooms that have been added.

Santa Ana's joy at the prospect of soon replacing those temporary classrooms with real buildings may be short-lived. It is facing a cut in its \$430 million annual budget of as much as \$18 million.

"Right now our plan is to use the \$60 million (from Tus-

tin) for construction but none of us knows what tomorrow will bring," said Mijares, the district superintendent.

Still, the board will stoutly resist diverting any of the base payment for other purposes.

"These funds are committed to construction," said John Palacio, outgoing president of the school board.

The biggest project the funds will support is Segerstrom High School, which will rise from 38 acres at MacArthur Boulevard and Raitt Street.

Construction is expected to begin in February; the school will be ready for classes in the fall of 2005. Land for that school cost \$38 million; the district expects to award a construction contract shortly after Jan. 1. Other planned work includes an expansion of Kennedy Elementary School, across from Century High School.

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