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## Irvine seeks 'quality' school funds

**Land developer Lennar Corp. is silent over request by school district for funding beyond state mandate. An impasse could lead to passing schools to Saddleback district.**

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The Irvine Unified school board is concerned about the funding for schools that will be built around the future Great Park, and members want to study whether to turn that portion of the district over to neighboring Saddleback Valley Unified.

While developers are obligated by law to pay minimum statutory development fees, Irvine schools require and expect more, board members said.

"Talk is cheap, schools are not," said school board member Carolyn McInerney. "It's that simple."

The nationally recognized school district has been negotiating with the Lennar Corp., which will develop three residential areas on the perimeter of the former El Toro Marine base, over how much the developer should contribute toward building a school there.

Fredric Woocher, an attorney representing Irvine Unified, said that after 18 months of negotiations, the district submitted a proposal 11 days ago specifying how much extra money is needed to build an "Irvine-quality" school near the Great Park. Lennar has yet to respond, and no company representatives attended the special meeting called Monday night where the board discussed the impasse.

School board members said they will hold firm to an agreement forged two years ago that called for Lennar to help provide the future residential area with a high-quality school by, among other things, donating a parcel of land.

The Lennar Corp. knows that Irvine schools will be a major selling point, and plays up the district's success in its marketing materials.

"Irvine has one of the top performing school systems in the nation," reads a Lennar marketing proposal aimed at luring businesses to a proposed Lifelong Learning District that will feature satellite college campuses. "In fact, the number one reason that people move to Irvine is for the quality of its K-12 schools."

Board members say that The Irvine Company, which has developed the majority of neighborhoods in Irvine, understands the value of good schools and provides the extra funding

needed for the best facilities and educational programs.

"They recognize that our schools are an asset to them," Woocher said of The Irvine Company.

But he conceded that Irvine Company projects are less complex than those that will surround the Great Park, which involve razing existing buildings and runways and installing basic infrastructure.

Further complicating the matter is the fact that the number of housing units Lennar will build around the Great Park is still up in the air. An initial plan called for 3,625 units, but an amended plan that's in the works could mean that number will jump to 9,500.

City Council member Christina Shea is discouraged by Lennar's lack of response and said it could affect her future votes on their projects.

"If they're not willing to step up to the plate now, I will never support additional housing there," she said.

Fellow council member Larry Agran was surprised at the school district's hard-line approach.

"I'm not taking Lennar's side," he said. "This just sounds a little like somebody needs to stop hyperventilating and just see this through."

School board president Mike Parham said the board will not build a school that isn't up to standard, but the alternatives, including busing students and placing portable classrooms on existing campuses, will impact kids.

Another alternative could be adjusting district boundaries so that neighboring Saddleback Valley Unified educates future students living around the Great Park, even though that could mean home prices will fall without the coveted Irvine Unified status.

"They're a declining enrollment district and they need every student they can get," Parham said of Saddleback.

Lennar representatives could not be reached for comment Monday.