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Committee member alleges Riverside school bond money is being spent illegally



Ten acres between Villegas Park and Ssgt. Salvador J. Lara Casa Blanca Library, which were bought by a company planning to build condos, are now set to become the first neighborhood school in Casa Blanca since 1967. Some argue Measure O money shouldn't be used for that purpose. (File photo by Ryan Hagen, Staff)

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A member of the board charged with overseeing the school bond that Riverside Unified voters approved in 2016 is alleging that several major projects planned for the funds aren't legal uses of the money. Citizens' Bond Oversight Committee member Jason Hunter said voters never approved spending Measure O proceeds to build new schools as the Riverside Unified School District plans. The measure's language sought voters' permission to repair and renovate current schools, Hunter said. Riverside schools officials and their legal consultants disagree, saying new schools are a proper way to spend Measure O dollars.

The committee, which advises the elected Riverside school board, discussed his concerns Tuesday, Aug. 20, before voting to end the discussion.

If Hunter is right, it could mean that tens of millions of dollars spent or planned for construction of neighborhood schools including campuses in [Casa Blanca](#), the Eastside and Highgrove, as well as a [planned STEM school](#) near UC Riverside, wouldn't be allowed. Hunter, a Riverside resident and former Riverside Public Utilities employee, follows and often questions the actions of local governments.

"It's bond fraud," Hunter alleged in an interview, echoing comments he made by letter and at committee meetings. "People voted to fix up existing schools, and then they (district officials) spend the money on new schools. In a few years, they'll come back and say, 'Our schools are falling apart; we need another bond measure.'"

The legal consultant for the bond measure, David Casnocha of Stradling Yocca Carlson & Rauth, wrote that new schools are a valid use of the money. In response to concerns that Casnocha could have a conflict of interest, district officials got a second legal opinion, from Terry Tao of Tao Rossini, that also backed district officials' planned use of the dollars.

"The language of the ballot includes both the UCR STEM Project and acquiring property for new schools," Tao wrote.

Hunter isn't convinced.

A sentence that talks about what "the repair and renovation of each of the existing school facilities may include" is the only place in the full measure where voters would see the phrase "acquire land" and "construct new schools," Hunter said.

"You don't 'repair' or 'renovate' a new school," he said.

Similarly, voters probably assumed the references to building a STEM school referred to the district's existing STEM school, not a new one, he said.

Much of the literature circulated before voters approved [Measure O](#) by more than 70% emphasized the need for repairs, as did a ballot summary. But in-person presentations talked about new schools that could be built, said Sergio San Martin, the school district's assistant superintendent for operations.

"I was one of the ones that gave those presentations, and in all my presentations I included the need for neighborhood schools, and particularly the need in Casa Blanca — which hasn't had a school in 50 years — and the Eastside," San Martin said.

After an extended discussion Aug. 20, with several residents siding with Hunter, the oversight board voted 4-3 not to continue discussing whether the money can be spent on new schools.

Committee members were chosen by Riverside school board members to review how the district spent the \$392 million bond and to inform the public.

“It is clearly the purview of the (school) board to select the projects, and it is clearly the purview of this committee to make sure the money is spent properly on the projects that they have chosen,” said George Frahm, chairman of the committee.

WHAT IS MEASURE O?

More than 70% of Riverside Unified School District voters said “yes” to the following question in 2016.

“To repair and upgrade Riverside schools, including deteriorating roofs, plumbing and electrical systems, improve student safety, security, and seismic safety, upgrade classrooms, science labs, career-training facilities, computer systems and instructional technology to support student achievement in math, science, engineering and skilled trades, and construct, acquire, repair classrooms, sites, facilities and equipment, shall Riverside Unified School District issue \$392 million in bonds at legal rates, with citizen oversight, no money for administrator salaries, all money staying local?”

<https://www.pe.com/2019/09/02/committee-member-alleges-riverside-school-bond-money-is-being-spent-illegally/#>