

Panel pledges quick recommendation about site for Upcountry high school

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MAKAWAO — The public uproar over where to build an Upcountry high school sputtered to what may be its conclusion Tuesday night with the panel assigned to recommend a site pledging to make a decision soon.

About 75 parents and community leaders offered a range of opinions on the controversy during the only public hearing to be held by the three-member committee empaneled by state Schools Superintendent Charles Toguchi to recommend a site.

After the meeting, Maui Upcountry Review Committee Chairman Peter Adler, an Oahu mediation specialist, said the board is aiming to make its recommendation within 10 days and maybe sooner.

Adler said the committee will continue to examine all of the documents, maps, press clippings and testimony generated over the past three years before making a decision.

"We'll try to move as quickly as we can," he said.

Toguchi said Tuesday he likely would approve any recommendation by the panel and move swiftly to

restart the planning and design process as soon as the decision is handed to him.

Earlier in the day, committee members toured all five sites under consideration for the school, including the Department of Education's preferred "Five Trees" site at the junction of Haleakala and Kula highways.

Adler declined to say if committee members had already eliminated any of the parcels from contention or whether they've narrowed down the choice to a couple of sites.

Tuesday night's 2½-hour meeting lacked the acrimonious punch of recent Upcountry high school gatherings, and most of the 34 speakers acceded to Adler's request to keep comments brief.

Committee member Michael Chun, president of Kamehameha Schools, told the group he was surprised and impressed by the proceedings.

"I was prepared for something a lot different than what happened tonight," Chun said. "This was the first time I've witnessed something like this, and I rather enjoyed it."

Many residents, including those who belong to the Friends of Upcountry Maui, the group that rallied

opposition to Five Trees, said they would agree to support whatever decision the panel makes.

Others said they didn't really care where the school was built, just so that it's completed as soon as possible.

"My own personal opinion is just get the high school built some damn place and do it quickly," parent Charlie Silva said.

In addition to Five Trees, the committee is looking at locations on Apana Road between Makawao Avenue and Makani Road, in lower Pukalani adjacent to Haleakala Highway, on Makawao Avenue east of the fire station and on Baldwin Avenue near the Veterans Cemetery. Each site was studied in the school's environmental impact statement.

One site not studied in the EIS won several endorsements at the meeting: the old Maui High School at Hamakuapoko, which is now occupied by the University of Hawaii's NiFTAL project.

Frank Domingo pointed out that the old school already belongs to the state, and funds would not be needed to buy the land — a considerable savings that could be used to improve its water system.

Linda Werner, co-president of the

Haiku School PTSA, said her organization supports the proposed site by the Veterans Cemetery because of its central location and accessibility to north coast residents.

The Five Trees parcel dominated most of the testimony, with 14 speakers favoring that site and only nine supporting the proposed parcel on Apana Road.

Eric Vares of a group called Friends of the Youth of Upcountry Maui said a silent majority wants the Five Trees site. He said its 50-plus acres is big enough to build plenty of athletic facilities and its attractive setting is conducive to learning.

But Charles Maxwell, president of E Malama Ike Kua Aina, told the panel he's worried that construction at Five Trees would open Upcountry to further development.

"Urbanization will happen and this will not be the Upcountry Maui as it is today," he said.

Alec McBarnet Jr., chairman of the Maui District School Advisory Council, said his board supports the Five Trees location. More importantly, he said, board members want the school built all at once instead of the planned phasing in of grade levels one year at a time.