

History of School in Hiddenbrooke

by Elizabeth Mathern

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Author's note: My name is Elizabeth Mathern and I am a former resident of Hiddenbrooke. I have been involved in the process of bringing a school to Hiddenbrooke since 2001, and I am one of the founders of the Vallejo Charter School (VCS), a K-8 public charter school in Vallejo. VCS is the charter school that was conceived of and created by Hiddenbrooke residents. I hope this brief history helps answer most of the questions about a school in Hiddenbrooke - it's a complex tale!

The idea of school in Hiddenbrooke began in the spring of 2001 – when a group of parents new to Hiddenbrooke contacted the Vallejo City Unified School District (VCUSD) about building a school on the land the district owns in Hiddenbrooke. Nothing much came of this – though there were sporadic communications between the parent group and the district. By spring 2004, the school district was bankrupt and the state had taken over. In January 2005, the remaining two members of the original group – myself included - met with the State Administrator to discuss a school in Hiddenbrooke. He was very direct and stated that there would be no school built in Hiddenbrooke in the foreseeable future. This was due to a number of reasons - primarily financial - including declining enrollment district-wide and the fact that very few Hiddenbrooke children attended VCUSD schools.

We told the State Administrator that we planned to start developing a charter school for the community. We then proceeded to recruit new members to the team, and the work to create a charter school began in late January 2005.

In October 2005, we presented the charter petition for the “Hiddenbrooke Community School” to the school district. In January 2006, the State Administrator denied the petition. That same night, at the same school board meeting where he denied the charter petition, the State Administrator reversed his earlier position and announced that the district would, in fact, build a traditional K-5 elementary school on the property in Hiddenbrooke.

At this point, the charter school story moves out of Hiddenbrooke. We, the charter founders, decided that we wanted to go ahead with the charter school – we believed it was important for the whole Vallejo community – and over the course of the next year and a half, we appealed the district's decision at both the county and state levels. In May 2007, the State Administrator reconsidered and approved the petition. The new school, now called the Vallejo Charter School, opened in August 2007 in a more central location in Vallejo. The school is about to begin its 6th year and it has been very successful.

So what about a school in Hiddenbrooke? After the very surprising announcement in January 2006 that the district would build a school in Hiddenbrooke, the district held a community information meeting at the Hiddenbrooke Golf Club. The plan was to survey Hiddenbrooke families and determine if there was enough interest for the school to go forward. Families were even required to sign an “intent to attend” statement. Roughly 40 families signed up. In early 2006, plans were drawn up for a school and work to get the necessary permits started.

During this period, support for the charter school was gaining steam and the district continued to believe that they would not have enough support from the families in Hiddenbrooke to operate the traditional school they were planning to build. In the mean time, they had spent a lot of money designing a new school facility. So, when the district finally approved the charter school in May 2007, they said that they would go forward with establishing a new charter school, build the school in Hiddenbrooke, and the Hiddenbrooke school site would eventually be the home of the newly approved charter school – thus, the charter school would end up in Hiddenbrooke after all.

However, the school site - which is at the end of Alder Creek in the Orchards neighborhood - has some complex issues that surfaced in the planning stage. The site was to be used for both a Park and school, with the school in front and the Park in the rear. Because the site is home to the endangered California Red-Legged Frog, federal and state environmental agencies would require mitigation for the impacts of building on this site, which could be expensive, especially given the limited financial resources of the school district. The original plans for the school never did get environmental clearance from the regulatory agencies despite efforts by the school district. The same issues that were relevant to the earlier school proposal are still relevant today, mainly the environmental problems and the financial resources of the district (both for construction and for paying teacher salaries). As a result, the charter school will likely continue to be located at the former Davidson Elementary site (on Del Sur Street, off of Magazine) for the foreseeable future and the district has not conducted any further work on building a school in Hiddenbrooke. A number of Hiddenbrooke children do attend this school. It is worth mentioning that if the charter school were to ever be moved to Hiddenbrooke, the school would be open to all students in Vallejo, and Hiddenbrooke children would not have any priority by virtue of living in Hiddenbrooke.

Hiddenbrooke residents should contact the school district for additional information; however, it seems highly unlikely that there will be a school in Hiddenbrooke. The plans for the new Park will be designed to be compatible with a future school if and when it is ever built.

Editor's Note: Elizabeth Mathern continues to be actively involved in the Vallejo Charter School. If you have further questions about the charter school, or about the history, feel free to contact her at emathern.consulting@gmail.com