

Art and Development On Collision Path In East LA

Posted By [admin](#) On April 26, 2012 @ 2:10 pm In [General News](#) | [4 Comments](#)

East Los Angeles area stakeholders are debating the pros and cons of two new charter schools moving to the site once occupied by the First Street Store in unincorporated East Los Angeles.

At the heart of the debate is whether a mural located on the now closed store's exterior should be retained as is, removed, or reconfigured to fit the plans of a new charter school.

Lea esta nota EN ESPAÑOL: [Arte y Desarrollo Chocan en el Este de Los Angeles](#)
[1]

Located at 3640 E. 1st St., the First Street Store, also affectionately known as "La Primera," was for decades the only department store in East LA.

Concerned that a new owner could demolish the building or the murals, [artists have started to collect signatures](#) [2] in hopes of saving the artwork.

A formal project or application has not yet been submitted to the County Planning Department, but the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles (MCLA) has issued a warning that the 1974 mural, "The Story of Our Struggle," could fall victim to the site's development, and is promoting a [petition to save the mural](#) [3] through their social media page on Facebook.com.



The former First Street Store was for decades the only department store in East LA, and is covered by a mural that is generating debate over its future. (EGP photo by Gloria Angelina Castillo)

Mural advocates say the petition wasn't a preemptive strike to stop the charter school from coming, but possibly the result of a lack of communication.

The developer, Pacific Charter School Development (PCSD), has been open about its intent to demolish and develop the site and an adjoining property, but has not yet provided much detail about their plans, according to the artists.

To date, the only plans that have been submitted are for a middle school on the adjacent property, according to LA County Director of Planning Richard Bruckner.

"It's my understanding that PCSD has two clients, one for a middle school and one of a high school. The application is to demolish the building for the middle school, no murals at this school. Demolition [for the building without murals] could start over the summer," Bruckner told EGP.

The artists have started a grassroots campaign to save the murals and are speaking to local businesses and neighbors about the issue, according to Isabel Rojas-Williams, the Mural Conservancy's executive director.

It is MCLA's mission to preserve murals in L.A. and the organization supports the efforts to save the landmark mural, she told EGP.

"The mural aimed to educate community, it is one of the most important murals in that segment of East LA," Rojas-Williams said, explaining the panels show issues that have affected the Chicano community but were never taught in history classes.

The mural, comprised of 18 painted tile panels, was featured in Time Magazine in 1975 and more recently in the UCLA Fowler Museum's exhibition "Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement," and The Getty Foundation initiative "Pacific Standard Time," according to the petition to save the building.

The mural "stand[s] today as East L.A.'s largest cultural heritage landmark, symbolizing the value of our Mexican-American and Chicano community," states to the petition.

Pacific Charter School Development (PCSD) President and CEO Eli Kennedy told EGP they are aware of the murals significance and plan to preserve them and reincorporate them into the new building's design.

"We value and totally respect those murals, we plan to have them be a part of the campus," he said.

He added, however, that keeping the mural facade as is could prove an obstacle to their goal of creating a safe, high quality school campus. The two properties are in escrow, and construction funding will be tight, he said.

PCSD is a non-profit charter school real estate development group; their client on this project is Alliance College-Ready Public Schools.

Last week, PCSD released a rendering for the new high school. It has the murals integrated into the design along First Street and South Townsend Avenue, but rearranged.



Pacific Charter School Development wants to demolish the current building to construct a high school campus. This image shows the new building with the preserved murals incorporated into the architecture. Rendering by Berliner and Associates Architecture, image courtesy of Pacific Charter School Development.

That design is not acceptable to Johnny D. González, also known as Don Juan, who spearheaded the original mural project, developed the theme, and designed the layout as a way to attract cultural tourists to East LA and the East LA School of Mexican American Fine Arts.

"I want to emphasize ...

everything needs to stay as it is to respect the integrity of the building and the mural," he told EGP.

González says he and others met with PCSC representatives and not demolishing the building was never an option for the developer.

"We were trying to get answers, we didn't know if it would be torn down right away," he said. "We are still in fear that tomorrow they may be there tearing it down."

González said the artists would prefer the building be preserved and converted to a school. They're also concerned the entire building could be torn down without demolition permits if they don't go along with the developer's plan.

Close to 2,000 signatures have already been collected to try to avoid that fate, he said.

Irma Nuñez, an educator and Gonzalez's business partner, said the building and murals are a cultural resource for the community and she would like to see it adapted and reused.

David Botello, one of the artists who worked on the mural, said he has many childhood memories of the First Street Store.

"As a child, I used to shine shoes in front of the store, we shopped for everything there. My mom used to shop for patterns and fabric to make dresses... it was like a one-stop-shop before malls," he told EGP.

He has written a six-page remembrance of the store. "The mural was meant to last. If it is taken apart, it will be too costly to put back up. That may never be done. Leave it be and retrofit the building. Show students the real value of art," he wrote.

Botello said the Van de Kamp building in Glassell Park was preserved with public funding and the charter school could do the same, but they "want to sell our community short".

Besides, he said, a charter school is likely to bring less business to the area, a notion some local merchants disagree with.

"My concern is that there is no business," Francisco Carrasco, owner of Don Francisco Pawn Shop, told EGP. His shop faces the building, but said he would not sign the petition when asked.

His and other businesses along the once thriving commercial corridor are hurting due to several factors, including the First Street Store's closure in 2007, Metro's elimination of several local bus lines, and the bad economy. Cesar Chavez and Whittier Boulevard are now the main commercial corridors, but it wasn't always that way, he said, noting that their street was passed over by the Metro Gold Line.

While he would have preferred retail businesses, Carrasco thinks new teenage customers and their parents could help stimulate the corridor.

"The people here are putting the breaks on development and commercialization," he said adding the corridor is still on a downward spiral. "The problem is the residential neighbors, they want everything to remain the same, or [get] worse."

Daniel Oh owns the Unique Dollar, a swap meet type business that houses multiple vendors. He said the school is a good idea, but thinks the site might be too small as is. "All are welcome," Oh said about the potential new customer base.

Marisol Cardenas operates the Snack Corner in the Unique Dollar, and says the school could bring them more business, but adds the murals should stay. "It is a part of East Los Angeles and they should leave it as is," she said.

Seventy-eight-year-old Juan Quintana, who has lived nearly half his life in East LA, said the murals are attractive and should be preserved if possible. Quintana, who was waiting for a bus, also noted the lack of public transportation on East First Street.

Pan American Bank's [1st Street branch is across the street from the mural site](#) ^[4]. The bank's president and CEO, Jesse Torres told EGP the proposed projects pit East Los Angeles history against

economic development and regardless of the outcome, "there is no way to create a win-win situation."

As a result, he said, he is stuck supporting "a position that is less than ideal." He said the appropriate resources should be used to safely remove the murals, and they should later be returned to "their rightful place and used to adorn a new construction ... for the entire community to view and future generations to appreciate," he told EGP in an email.

Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools President and CEO Judy Burton says the middle school would be a brand new middle school for Alliance. She also said they plan to relocate the [Media Arts and Entertainment Design High School](#) ^[5] in East LA to the former First Street Store location. The school, opened in 2009 on Whittier Boulevard next to the Golden Gate Theatre, has outgrown its current location, she said.

Burton said the school already houses one grade at Ramona Opportunity High School, and may need to move some students to other locations next year when they begin to serve 12th graders for the first time.

Burton said the murals are "beautiful" and they always planned to keep them.

"The problem is public state funds require us to adhere to state guidelines," she said, explaining that preserving the original façade may pose a safety issue.

The middle school will be financed with private funds, but the high school will be built using some taxpayer money, she said. The high school would ultimately become LAUSD property if Alliance closes the school, she said.

Burton said students at the high school and their parents are aware of the planned move and they hope to move forward with both the project and the murals.

Because it is a Media Arts and Design high school, it would be great if the students could learn from the artist and continue their legacy, she said.

Built in 1924, the site is not currently recognized as a historic landmark.

According to Adrian Scott Fine, director of advocacy for the Los Angeles Conservancy, the LA Conservancy has not taken a formal stand on the issue but sees the importance of both the building and the murals to the community.

The LA Conservancy, which actively advocated for the preservation of the Golden Gate Theatre and other sites in East LA, is paying attention to the discussions, but Fine says, "saving elements [of a building] is not meaningful preservation."

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[2] [artists have started to collect signatures](#): <http://www.theeastsiderla.com/tag/east-los-angeles/>

[3] [petition to save the mural](#): <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=426433454050089&set=a.211693512190752.64559.162768383749932&type=1>

[4] 1st Street branch is across the street from the mural site:

<http://www.kcet.org/socal/departures/landofsunshine/arts/murals/chicano-mural-conversation-extends-across-east-la-corner.html>

[5] Media Arts and Entertainment Design High School:
<http://www.laalliance.org/schools/mediaarts/>

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