

A last-ditch effort to stop schools' move

By JAMES DAY

BERKELEY — Teachers and students of the California Schools for the Deaf and Blind, in what may be a final effort to oppose the move from Berkeley to Fremont, have renewed complaints that it will be more difficult for the students to learn to live independently in the more rural Fremont site.

During a tour of the two sites Thursday, teachers said blind students need an urban setting such as Berkeley to learn how to function in the real world, and criticized the \$53 million Fremont facility as an isolated facility in the middle of a cabbage patch.

The tour was an 11th-hour attempt to drum up media and public pressure to force the Legislature to reconsider the move in the words of one teacher, "the last major effort to get the state to reconsider, though there's no particular reason to believe they will hear us."

Besides testimony from students

and teachers about which facility would best serve the 115 blind students, the tour leaders again repeated the litany of other objections to the schools' move next fall, including a claim that an erroneous earthquake prediction spurred the move.

"Mobility teacher" Leo Bailey said, "The greatest loss for the blind is the loss of independent travel, something that is best learned in an urban setting. But there is no public transportation near the Fremont site and (very few) stairs to learn how to handle stairs."

Marjorie Donovan, a resident of the schools and a Berkeley High sophomore, said, "People are helpful here and the bus stops are so close. In a place like Fremont you can't learn what real life is like. Here you can ask for help. The community is used to us."

Ms. Donovan and others said having the schools in Berkeley also means the students have the help of various "support groups not present in Fremont, including about 60 volunteers from UC-Berkeley.

At the muddy Fremont site, where construction crews worked on the new buildings, Ms. Donovan stood in the first row of a cabbage patch across the road and said, "This is stupid. Where can we go around here?"

Mrs. Ron Richardson, the mother of a blind student from Sacramento, said she feared the parents would not have the same peace of mind if their children were moved to Fremont. "It's so isolated," she said.

Other complaints from teachers and students were:

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- that the Fremont site was less secure, especially since few of the buildings' windows faced out to the approaches of the site, thus allowing vandals to sneak in.
 - that there were no places of interest for the students to go, none of



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the gardens and tactile museums that Berkeley offers and no stores or supermarkets nearby.

● that Fremont's sidewalk system is incomplete and thus would confuse and mislead blind students.

● that while the deaf students, who were not represented at the tour, could drive, the blind students needed the mass transportation available in Berkeley.

● that many of the more than 30 staff members would not be able to move to Fremont because they had bought houses in Berkeley and settled there.

● that the state Department of Education is violating its legal mandate to provide the best possible care for blind students.

● that the Department of Education used outdated seismographic maps to determine that the Berkeley site was unsafe, while UC-Berkeley geologists have shown that the only earthquake fault is not under the buildings, as originally thought, but near the running track; and that the Fremont site is near the Hayward Fault and is on much softer and more unstable ground than is the Berkeley site.

Leaders of the tour said they would meet today with state education officials and local Assemblyman Tom Bates today to urge officials to reconsider the move.

Press inquiries to the officials directly in charge of the schools were referred to Vic Biondi, press assistant to state Superintendent of Public Instruction Wilson Riles, who said Thursday that the department would oppose reversing the move to Fremont.

As to the teachers' complaints about the site, Biondi said, "The area is planned for development, it will become more urban . . . No doubt there's some truth to what they say, but things can be corrected. Fremont wants the schools and I'm sure it'll help all it can."

Biondi noted that the pricetag for the Fremont facility was now \$53 million and said state studies show it would take \$30 million to make the Berkeley site fire and earthquake safe, adding that the Legislature is bound to look askance at reversing itself with such huge sums of money involved.