

EDITORIAL

ROBBING THE BLIND

The Berkeley City Council held a public hearing on March 9 concerning the Deaf/Blind Schools site. At that hearing, Ken Stein, representing the GRASSROOTS Collective, made the following statement. At a special meeting on March 10, the city council voted to hand the site over to the University, before the final court decision on return of the blind school to the site and with no compensation to the City of Berkeley. Councilmembers Leo Bach, Shirley Dean, Gilda Feller, James Sweeney and Andrea Washburn voted for University acquisition; Councilmembers John Denton and Veronika Fukson voted against; Mayor Gus Newport abstained (Councilmember Florence McDonald was unavoidably absent).

Because it is likely that you will make your decision tonight, I think it's important to get some things on record. The site for the California Schools is a very historic site, so I will begin with a little history. One hundred and sixteen years ago, in 1866, a legislative act provided for a commission to select a site for the California School for the Deaf and Blind. In a report to the legislature, the commission stated that "the location should not be in the heart of a large city, nor in the remote country; but rather in a locality within reach of the social and economic advantages of a well-established community." " Their judgement was also that the site to be chosen "should be, if possible, in the vicinity of other educational institutions and where there [was] a population likely to cherish such an institution."

Ground was broken in Berkeley in July 1867 — 6 years before the University of California came to Berkeley, and 11 years before Berkeley was even a city. Clearly, the social and cultural advantages which the schools and the citizens of Berkeley have exchanged with each other over the 113 years that the schools were in Berkeley are inestimable. Somewhere between then and now, however, the city of Berkeley stopped cherishing that institution.

Which brings us to this evening's public hearing — an event of great historical significance in its own right. It is my understanding that the ABC council majority [Feller, Bach, Sweeney, Dean and Washburn] have come here tonight fully prepared to vote to hand over the site of the Deaf and Blind Schools to the University of California. If that is true, then what we are here to witness is in fact the final chapter of what is, without any question, the most corrupt and shameful episode in Berkeley's entire 104-year history; namely, the throwing out of the California Schools for the Deaf and Blind, and the related land-grab by the university — a land-grab which has had the full cooperation of the City of Berkeley and the state government, and which was done with the full collusion of Assemblyman Tom Bates.

Five years ago, 4 years ago, 3 years ago, 2 years ago — John diFrancesca and other staff members of the California Schools for the Blind and Deaf, as well as members of the community, tried to tell the city, tried to tell the press, tried to tell anyone who would listen, that there was no earthquake fault on the site; that no tests had ever been done. But no one would listen. "Too bad," you say, "but what can we do now? — After all, that's just history."

Well, what has to do much more with the present is that this council has time and again reaffirmed its commitment not to let the land go, before the court case was settled. Well, the court case is *not* settled. The judge has yet to rule on whether or not Fremont is earthquake-safe, which clearly it is not. Any number of geologists have testified that even a moderate earthquake would liquify the ground under the Fremont schools. The students need to be given the option of returning to Berkeley.

Wilson Riles' office has said that if the Fremont site is closed, then the students will be mainstreamed — this is pure fantasy. For the most part, there are multiply-handicapped children; children who, even in the best of times, would not be admitted to public schools. The fact is that Ronald Reagan is in the process of wiping out the civil rights advances that disabled people have made in the past 10 years. The latest recommendations of the Office of Management and Budget — recommendations that Reagan is going to approve — destroy Section 504 assurances of equal opportunity and equal treatment. Missing in OMB's draft recommendations are all references to the right to equal opportunity, the right to equally effective services, and the right to integration.

What this means is that even non-severely disabled children will have trouble getting mainstreamed, much less multiply-handicapped individuals. So that if Fremont shuts down, as now seems very possible, and if the door is closed to Berkeley, then these children will have nowhere to go. They will be institutionalized, they will be warehoused, and they will have no opportunity of achieving the independent and self-fulfilling lives achieved by the thousands of graduates who have preceded them at the California Schools for the Deaf and Blind. The state is not about to pay an additional \$60 million for a new site.

What we have here tonight reminds me very much of a bunch of greedy relatives, each with their own greedy little interests, sitting around waiting for the reading of the will. What's especially creepy is that the patient isn't even dead yet — the case hasn't been settled, and all of your saying that it has been, will not make it so. The university has been slaving over tonight's presumed vote for the past fifty years. They can be made to wait another six months.

I will only add, in closing, that we are not here tonight to talk about history. We are not here tonight to talk about land use (or "site re-use," as it is called in the council agenda). What we are here to talk about tonight is people, and whether or not you are going to continue the corruption, and whether or not you are going to force all of the current students — and all those who would have been *future* students — of the California Schools for the Deaf and Blind to be treated like garbage.