HISD will accept $7.5 million gift, rename arts campus

By Ericka Mellon

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After days of tension and hours of passionate debate, the Houston school board voted 7-2 Thursday to accept a $7.5 million gift for the city's renowned arts high school and to rename the campus after the donors.

The vote marked the first time the Houston Independent School District sold naming rights for a campus - a rarity in the public elementary and secondary school arena.

The Houston-based Kinder Foundation, run by local billionaire couple Rich and Nancy Kinder, offered the donation in exchange for calling the campus the Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. The money will go toward rebuilding the school downtown - funding theater lighting and seats, a sound system, a specialized dance floor and more.

"We hope these joint and cooperative efforts preserve the long-term future of one of Houston's most acclaimed and diverse schools and forge a new path through public/private partnership to support future HISD schools," Rich Kinder said in a statement after the vote.

The Kinder Foundation has given nearly $260 million in gifts and pledges for various projects, including major park upgrades throughout Houston and excellence in teaching awards.

Board approval of the renaming deal had been in doubt since a contentious meeting Monday. Several trustees expressed frustration over the private negotiations that took place concerning the gift and questioned the fairness to

other campuses in the district. Ultimately, for one conflicted board member, the decision came down to not wanting to punish students at the school despite problems with the process.

"I do not believe you deprive our high-performing schools of what they need to get to equity," trustee Rhonda Skillern-Jones, who has a son at the arts high school, said Thursday evening.

Jones, Davila oppose deal

Board member Mike Lunceford, who brought forward the renaming proposal, made a surprise announcement minutes before the vote that he planned to resign from the board effective at the end of the year. He apologized to his fellow trustees if he communicated poorly with them. He added that his board service was taking up significant time as he was commuting to Midland weekly for work.

Houston board member Jolanda Jones, who joined with trustee Diana Davila to oppose the deal, described the gift and renaming process as "sneaky." Davila will represent the arts school when it moves downtown - it's set to open in 2018 - but she said she was not kept informed about the renaming.

"I find it offensive that people say if you don't vote for this, that you don't care about the kids. Actually I care about all the kids in HISD," Jones said.

"It seems like HISD is like a pimp, and the schools are what they sell," Jones added. "That was the nicest way I could think to say it."

New Superintendent Richard Carranza did not comment during the deliberations Thursday. He previously expressed support for the gift and after some trustees balked Monday, he said he hoped to reach a workable deal.

"Sometimes when you hold tight, people do the right thing," trustee Anna Eastman, who sided with the majority, said after the vote.

Several students from the arts high school and parents urged trustees to accept the donation, while the proposal drew mixed reactions from community members.

"Please do not close the door on this remarkable opportunity," parent Mary Carlson told the board.

On the flip side, Larry McKinzie, a former Houston school board candidate and teacher, suggested that the proposed donation for the arts school would further inequities in the district.

"It seems like it's the have and the have-nots again," McKinzie said.

Student makeup less diverse

The arts school has a much lower percentage of low-income students and black and Hispanic students than the district average. To get into the school, students must apply and audition.

The school's principal, R. Scott Allen, said he has stepped up recruiting and diversity efforts. He called on the district to improve fine-arts offerings at middle schools across the city to help prepare students.

About the gift, he said, "It just allows us to breathe and know we're going to get the building HISD told us we were going to get before our ground breaking."

The arts high school is being rebuilt near Discovery Green Park under the school district's last bond measure, approved by voters in 2012. The project's original budget was $80 million, the largest per-pupil cost of any of the bond-

funded projects. The budget then was increased by $8 million when the board agreed to pour more money into the $1.9 billion bond program to address rising construction costs.

In the spring of this year, however, district officials said the arts high school would cost an extra $5 million to include features instrumental to an arts program such as theater lighting. At that point, HSPVA Friends, a nonprofit that supports the school, began fundraising and negotiated a deal with the Kinder Foundation.

Scott McClelland, president of the H-E-B grocery store chain in Houston, told the board Thursday that he thought the donation would lead to philanthropic gifts for other schools, while rejecting the deal would "be sending a message to other donors." Ann Scott, the executive director of the HISD Foundation, which works with the district to raise money, also urged acceptance of the deal.