

NOTICE OF EXEMPTION

To: County Clerk, Peter Aldana
County of Riverside
4080 Lemon Street, 1st Floor
Riverside, CA 92501

From: Menifee Union School District
29775 Haun Road
Menifee, CA 92584

Riverside County Planning Department
4080 Lemon Street, 12th Floor
Riverside, CA 92502-1409

Project Title:

Bell Mountain Middle School Project

Project Location - Specific:

28525 La Piedra Rd, Menifee, CA 92584

Project Location – City: Menifee

Project Location – County: Riverside

Description of Nature, Purpose and Beneficiaries of Project:

The proposed project would add five classrooms to the Bell Mountain Middle School to support the predicted growth of new students due to the increased housing within the District. Construction is expected to begin in October 2025 and be complete by August 2026.

Name of Public Agency Approving Project:

Menifee Union School District

Name of Person or Agency Carrying Out Project:

Menifee Union School District

Exempt Status:

- ☐ Ministerial (Sec. 21080(b)(1); 15268)
- ☐ Declared Emergency (Sec. 21080(b)(3); 15269(a))
- ☐ Emergency Project (Sec. 21080(b)(4); 15269(b)(c))
- ☒ Categorical Exemption: State type and section number: Class 1, CEQA Guidelines Section 15301, and Class 14, CEQA Guidelines Section 15314
- ☐ Statutory Exemption: (PRC §21080.23, CEQA Guidelines Section 15284)

Reasons why project is exempt:

See the Attachment for a discussion on why the project meets the requirements for categorical exemptions under CEQA Guidelines Sections 15301 and 15314.

Lead Agency Contact Person:

Kyle Dee

Telephone:

951-672-1851

If filed by applicant:

1. Attached certified document of exemption findings
2. Has NOE been filed by the public agency approving the project? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Agency Representative Signature: 

Date: 09/30/2024 Title: Assist. Director of Facilities

- ☒ Signed by Lead Agency
- ☐ Signed by Applicant

Date Received for Filing at OPR 10/24/2024

CATEGORICAL EXEMPTION

BELL MOUNTAIN MIDDLE SCHOOL PROJECT

This document assesses the use of a categorical exemption in the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the addition of classrooms to the Bell Mountain Middle School under California Public Resources Code Section 21084 and CEQA Guidelines Sections 15301 and 15314 (California Code of Regulations Title 14 Sections 15000 et seq.)

1.0 PROJECT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Menifee Union School District (MUSD or District) is proposing improvements to Bell Mountain Middle School (School), located in Menifee, California (the proposed project), which opened in July 2002. The proposed project would add classrooms to the school to support the predicted growth of new students due to the increased housing within the District.

1.1 PROJECT LOCATION AND ZONING

Bell Mountain Middle School is located at 28525 La Piedra Road, near the intersection of Holland Road and Menifee Road in Menifee, California. The school consists of approximately 22 acres of property. Regional access to the site is provided from Newport Road and Menifee Road or Antelope Road. Interstate 215 is located approximately 2,300 feet or 0.45 mile west of the school site.

Land use north and south of the school site is primarily residential. Land use east of the site is a regional park with residential uses east of the park. The Mount San Jacinto College, Menifee Valley Campus is located west of the Bell Mountain Middle School site.

1.2 EXISTING FACILITIES

Bell Mountain Middle School contains a central main school building consisting of single-story classrooms and administration buildings, for a total of 46 classrooms. In addition to classrooms, the existing school contains a multi-purpose room and library, as well as recreational areas including basketball courts, outdoor sitting areas, grass fields, and a track and field. Student drop-off and pick-up areas are provided on the northern boundary of the school site, adjacent to La Piedra Road. Parking is provided in a parking lot with canopies of solar panels, along the eastern boundary of the school site, with access from La Piedra Road.

1.3 SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND CAPACITY

Bell Mountain Middle School serves Grades 6 through 8 and had an enrollment of 1,090 students in the 2023 - 2024 school year. Table 1 shows student enrollment at the school

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averaged approximately 1,137 students per year, over the last 10 years. The school opened as a Grade 6 through Grade 8 school in July 2002.

TABLE 1

Bell Mountain Middle School Enrollment History

SCHOOL YEAR	ENROLLMENT
2023-2024	1,090
2022-2023	1,097
2021-2022	1,011
2020-2021	1,067
2019-2020	1,118
2018-2019	1,204
2017-2018	1,245
2016-2017	1,214
2015-2016	1,146
2014-2015	1,173
10-Year Average Enrollment	1,137

Source: CDE, 2024

2.0 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The District is proposing improvements to Bell Mountain Middle School, located in Menifee, California. The proposed project would add facilities at the school to provide additional educational facilities to handle the expected increase in student population associated with the increase in housing development in Menifee.

The project would add five modular classrooms within the confines of the existing school site on the south side of the campus. The site for the new classrooms is flat and has been graded. In addition, the project would complete minor site work to incorporate the new structures into the existing school site, including the addition of walkways, landscaping, etc. Construction activities are expected to begin in October 2025 and be complete by August 2026.

3.0 CEQA EVALUATION

3.1 CLASS 1 EXEMPTION – EXISTING FACILITIES

A Class 1 Exemption (CEQA Section 15301 – Existing Facilities) applies to the “operation, repair, maintenance, permitting leasing, licensing, or minor alteration of existing public or private structures, facilities, mechanical equipment or topographical features, involving negligible or no expansion of existing or former use.” The key consideration is whether the project involves negligible or no expansion of use and includes “additions to existing

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structures provided that the addition will not result in an increase of more than 10,000 square feet if: (a) the project is in an area where all public services and facilities are available to allow for maximum development permissible in the General Plan; and (b) the area in which the project is located is not environmentally sensitive (CEQA Section 15301(e)(2)).

The project will add five classrooms which are expected to be 1,440 square feet each or a total of 7,200 square feet (i.e., less than 10,000 square feet). The school is located within an area that is currently supplied with all public facilities including electricity, natural gas, roads, etc. and would not require the construction of new public facilities. The new classrooms will be located within the existing school site, which has been graded. Therefore, the project would not be located within an environmentally sensitive area.

Therefore, the project represents a negligible expansion of the existing use and the proposed modifications to Bell Mountain Middle School are considered to be exempt per CEQA Guidelines §15301 Class 1 exemption for the following reasons:

- (1) The proposed project will be located on the same site as the existing school site.
- (2) The new classrooms and facilities will not result in a change in purpose and are being installed to provide educational facilities to handle the increase in expected student population due to the increase in housing in Menifee.
- (3) The project will result in an addition to the school of less than 10,000 square feet.
- (4) Sufficient public services are available to service the school site.
- (5) The project will be located within the existing school site and is not located in an environmental sensitive area.

3.2 CLASS 14 EXEMPTION – MINOR ADDITIONS TO SCHOOLS

CEQA guidelines include exemptions for certain types of projects, including school projects. A Class 14 Exemption (CEQA Section 15314 – Minor Additions to Schools) applies to “minor additions to existing schools within existing school grounds where the addition does not increase original student capacity by more than 25% or 10 classrooms, whichever is less.”

The proposed project will result in the addition of five classrooms at the school site. All of the proposed modifications to Bell Mountain Middle School are within the confines of the existing school site that has already been graded. The District uses a classroom loading capacity of a maximum of 30 students per classroom. Assuming the maximum student capacity of 30 students per classroom, the increase in student capacity would be 150 students or an increase of 11 percent (see Table 2).

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TABLE 2

Bell Mountain Middle School Current and Future Student Capacity

	No. of Classrooms	Student Design Capacity
Existing School	46	1,380
Proposed School Modifications	51	1,530
Percent Increase:		11 %

(1) Assumes student capacity of 30 per classroom for middle schools.

Based on the above, the proposed project would result in a potential increase in student population of 11 percent. (Note 2023-2024 actual school enrollment was 1,090 so the actual number of students is expected to be less.) Therefore, the proposed modifications to Bell Mountain Middle School are considered to be exempt per CEQA Guidelines Section 15314 Class 14 Exemption for the following reasons:

- (1) The proposed project would result in an increase in five classrooms at the school site, which is less than 10; and
- (2) The increase in student capacity would be approximately 11 percent, which is less than 25 percent.

3.3 EXCEPTIONS TO CATEGORICAL EXEMPTIONS

CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2, Exceptions, identifies conditions under which categorical exemptions would not be applicable. The proposed project has been reviewed under Section 15300.2 for characteristics or circumstances that might invalidate findings that the proposed project is exempt.

A. Location

CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2(a) states that Class 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11 exemptions are qualified by consideration of whether the project is located in a uniquely sensitive environment, such that it impacts an environmental resource of hazardous or critical concern that has been designated, precisely mapped, and officially adopted pursuant to law by federal, state, or local agencies. This exception does not apply to the project as it is exempt under a Class 1 and Class 14 exemptions and all modifications would occur within an existing school campus where there are no known sensitive environmental conditions.

B. Cumulative Impact

Exemptions are not applicable when there is a significant cumulative impact of “successive projects of the same type in the same place over time.” Beyond the proposed project, the District is also adding full-time kindergarten (K) and transitional kindergarten (TK) to all of its elementary schools. The District has or will construct improvements at most elementary schools within the district to handle the increase in student population created

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by the state mandates over a period of four years. The modifications began in October 2022 with five elementary schools (Evans Ranch, Harvest Hill STEAM Academy, Chester Morrison, Southshore, and Taawila) converting to transitional kindergarten and full-time kindergarten by August 2023. The Callie Kirkpatrick Elementary School is scheduled to undergo minor modifications beginning in October 2025 and be completed in August 2026. The remaining elementary schools would be upgraded as funding allows. Overall, the District estimates it will require the construction of 64 transitional kindergarten and full-time kindergarten classroom buildings at 11 different elementary campuses, plus additional playground equipment, shade structures, and Americans with Disability Act upgrades.

The environmental effects caused by the construction of the TK/K improvements would be expected to be limited to localized impacts, limited to construction activities, and not within range of project effects at the other school sites, e.g., traffic, noise, etc. The construction activities will be phased with ground work occurring at one school site at a time. Limited ground work will be required at each school as construction activities would occur within the confines of the existing school sites, which have already been graded and developed. Modular buildings are expected to be installed, which will largely be constructed off-site, and put into place at the school sites using cranes, once the foundations have been developed. Most of the onsite construction activities would be limited to installation of interior improvements, e.g., flooring, ceilings, electrical, plumbing, painting, cabinets, etc., which primarily require manual labor and minimal construction equipment. The only school that is expected to be under construction at the same time as Bell Mountain Middle School, is Callie Kirkpatrick Elementary School which will include the addition of four modular buildings. The improvements at each school site would comply with applicable local, state, and federal regulations and District best management practices. Therefore, any potential overlap of construction activities would be limited to interior improvements, not grading and heavy construction activities, and therefore, would not result in significant adverse construction impacts and would not be cumulatively considerable.

The Bell Mountain Middle School improvements are in response to the increased development included in the City of Menifee's General Plan; however, the school improvements themselves would not generate increased population. The other school projects that have occurred recently are to comply with the state mandates to provide full-time kindergarten and transitional kindergarten for all eligible California students and would also not result in an increase in population in the Menifee area. The state mandates would increase the student population at each school site by providing TK for four-year olds, which is not currently required. Providing TK at the local elementary school sites is expected to make pre-school opportunities more available to the local communities, minimizing the need to travel to obtain pre-school education. Further, providing additional middle school education opportunities in the local area would also minimize the need to travel to obtain appropriate educational opportunities. The proposed project is not expected to result in cumulative impacts within the school district. Therefore, this exception does not apply to the proposed project.

C. Significant Effects

A categorical exemption cannot be used for an activity where there is a reasonable possibility that the activity will have a significant effect on the environment due to unusual circumstances (CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2(c)). The determination whether this exception applies involves two distinct questions: (1) whether the project presents unusual circumstances, and (2) whether there is a reasonable possibility that a significant environmental impact will result from those unusual circumstances. The lead agency considers the second prong of this test only if it first finds that some circumstance of the project is unusual. *Berkeley Hillside Preservation v. City of Berkeley* (2015) 60 C4th 1086, 1104.

The proposed facility improvements at Bell Mountain Middle School are not unusual. The proposed project, which includes new buildings, would be confined to the boundaries of the existing school campus. The height and architecture of the buildings would be one-story and consistent with the existing campus. The facility improvements are required to provide adequate educational opportunities to the existing and future population of the school district. The anticipated construction methods would be common for school facility construction projects, which must adhere to strict standards established by California Code of Regulations Title 5, California Building Code, and California Education Code and are overseen by the California Department of Education and Division of the State Architect.

There are no known unusual circumstances related to the project site or the proposed project, and there is also no evidence that the project would cause significant direct or indirect environmental effects. The site has been developed and no additional grading of the site is required. The District and its construction manager will comply with all applicable local, state, and federal laws, regulations, and best management practices that would minimize potential environmental impacts caused by construction activities. Therefore, this exception does not apply to the proposed project.

D. Scenic Highways

A categorical exemption cannot be used for a project which may result in damage to scenic resources, including but not limited to trees, historic buildings, rock outcroppings or similar resources, within a highway officially designated as a state scenic highway (CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2(d)). The closest officially designated scenic highway is State Route 74 heading northeast to CA-111 in Palm Desert, CA, within the San Bernardino National Forest (Cal Trans, 2024). Scenic State Route 74 is located approximately 20 miles north/east of the school site. Additionally, Interstate 15 (I-15), which is listed as an Eligible State Scenic Highway – Not Officially Designated, is located approximately eight miles west of the school site. Due to the distance, topography, and intervening hills/structures, the school site would not be visible or result in a visual impact to a scenic resource, including State Route 74 and I-15. Therefore, this exception does not apply to the proposed project.

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E. Hazardous Waste Sites

A categorical exemption cannot be used for a project on a site that is on any list compiled pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the California Government Code (CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2(e)). Section 65962.5 of the California Government Code specifies: (1) lists of hazardous materials sites and hazardous waste facilities; (2) hazardous waste discharges for which the State Water Quality Control Board has issued certain types of orders; (3) public drinking water wells containing detectable levels of organic contaminants; (4) underground storage tanks with reported unauthorized releases; and (5) solid waste disposal facilities from which hazardous waste has migrated.

Three regulatory agency databases were searched including: (1) GeoTracker, maintained by the State Water Resources Control Board; (2) EnviroStor, maintained by the California Department of Toxic Substances Control; and (3) EnviroMapper, maintained by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Using these search databases, no sites were found within 3,500 feet of Bell Mountain Middle School. A site clean-up was completed at a gasoline station approximately 3,800 feet from the school site. The clean-up of the site was completed in 2011 and the case was closed by the State Water Resources Control Board, meaning the site had been remediated to regulatory requirements. Based on the above, there is no known contamination that would impact the Bell Mountain Middle School. Therefore, this exception for hazardous waste sites does not apply to the proposed project.

F. Historic Resources

A categorical exemption cannot be used for a project which may cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource. Historical resources are defined as buildings, structures, or objects that are more than 50 years old (CCR 4852(d)(2)). The Bell Mountain Middle School opened in July 2002 and does not meet the minimum age requirement of 50 years to be considered for historical significance. The project will not remove any buildings. Additionally, the project site is not listed on an official local register of historical resources, the California Register of Historical Resources, or the National Register of Historic Places (OHP, 2024). Therefore, this exception for historical resources does not apply to the proposed project.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion, the proposed modifications to the Bell Mountain Middle School are considered to be exempt per CEQA Guidelines Section 15301 Class 1 and Section 15314 Class 14 exemptions for the following reasons:

- (1) The proposed project (modifications to accommodate anticipated increased enrollment) will be located on the same site as the existing school site.
- (2) The new classrooms and facilities will not result in a change in purpose.

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- (3) The project will result in an addition to the school of less than 10,000 square feet.
- (4) Sufficient public services are available to service the school site.
- (5) The project will be located within the existing school site and is not located in an environmentally sensitive area.
- (6) The proposed project would result in an increase of five classrooms (which is less than an increase of 10 classrooms).
- (7) Sufficient public services are available to service the school site.
- (8) The potential increase in student capacity is 11 percent; therefore, the capacity would not increase more than 25 percent.
- (9) None of the exceptions to the exemptions apply to the proposed project.

Therefore, the proposed modifications to Bell Mountain Middle School meet the requirements of CEQA Guidelines Section 15301 Class 1 and Section 15314 Class 14 exemptions and the proposed project is exempt under CEQA.

5.0 REFERENCES

- CDE, 2024. California Department of Education, Education Demographics Unit, Information from Data Quest. Accessed September 24, 2024. Available at: <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dataquest.asp>
- CDE, 2024. California Department of Education, California School Directory. Accessed September 24, 2024. Available at: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/SchoolDirectory/details?cdscode=33671166119721>
- California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), 2024. California Scenic Highways, Scenic Highway Systems List. Accessed September 20, 2024. <https://dot.ca.gov/programs/design/lap-landscape-architecture-and-community-livability/lap-liv-i-scenic-highways>
- Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC), 2024. EnviroStor Database. Accessed September 25, 2024. <https://www.envirostor.dtsc.ca.gov/public/map/?myaddress=30250+bradley+road+menifee>
- Office of Historic Preservation (OHP), 2024. Listed California Historical Resources. Accessed September 24, 2024. <https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/ListedResources/?view=county&criteria=33>
- Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB), 2024. GeoTracker Database. Accessed September 25, 2024. https://geotracker.waterboards.ca.gov/profile_report.asp?global_id=T0606519229

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U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA), 2024. EnviroMapper Database.
Accessed September 25, 2024.

[https://geopub.epa.gov/myem/efmap/index.html?ve=10,37.371541,-
122.038000&pText=Sunnyvale,%20California](https://geopub.epa.gov/myem/efmap/index.html?ve=10,37.371541,-122.038000&pText=Sunnyvale,%20California)

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