

Contra Costa

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Local • Bay Area

Students try hand at city planning

■ WALNUT CREEK:

Las Lomas class gains new appreciation for process after team project

Should we tear down the homeless shelter to add to the shopping district? Would luxury condominiums draw more revenue than affordable housing?

Do grocery stores create too much traffic to put in the middle of a block?

Building a city — even if it's with Legos — isn't easy. Students at Las Lomas High School in

INSIDE OUR SCHOOLS

By Shirley Dang

Walnut Creek learned that lesson this fall while redesigning the fictional neighborhood of Elmwood as part of a class project.

Senior Jake Adkins, 17, said the hands-on nature of the assignment differed from a math test or history quiz: "There's no right answer."

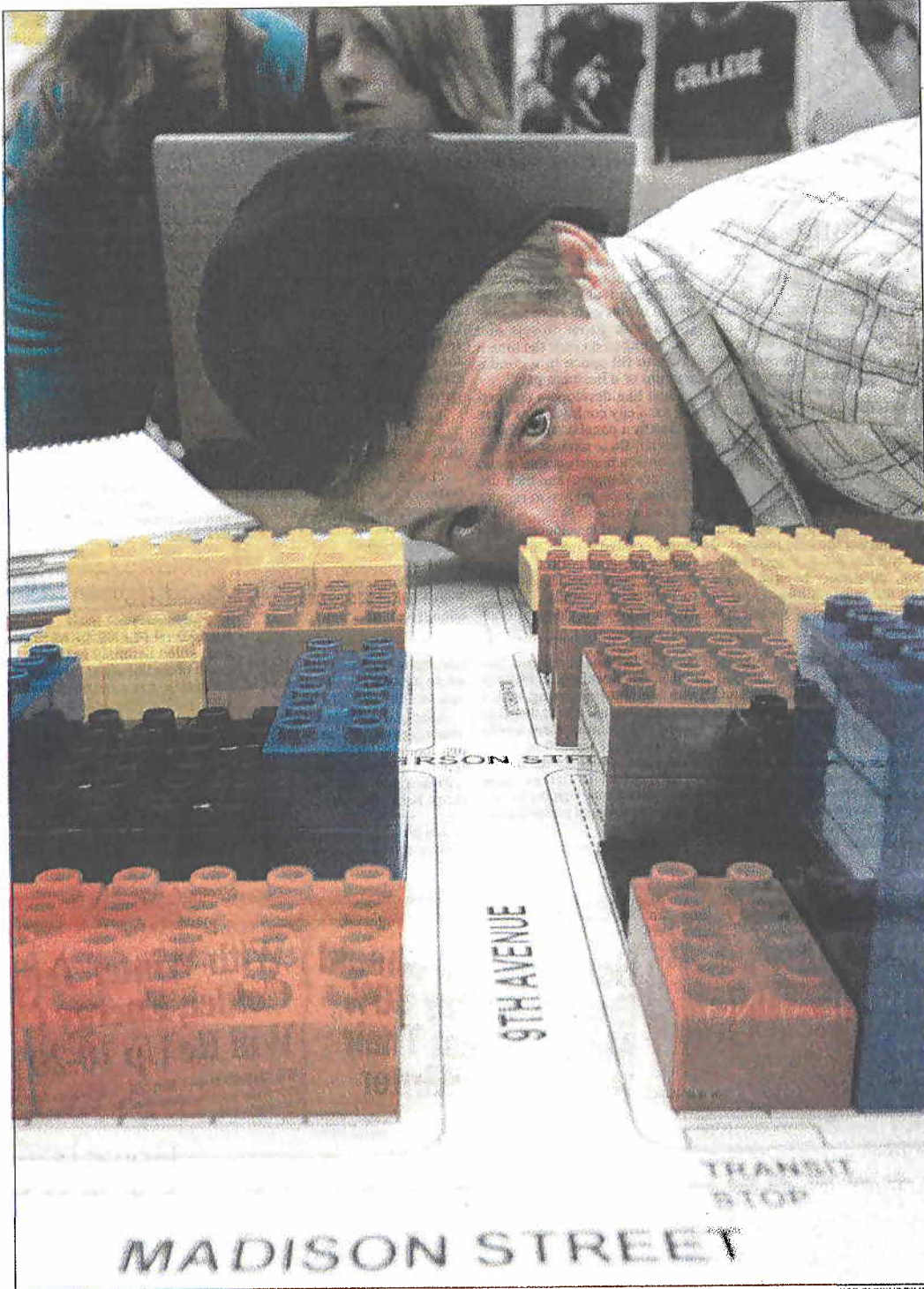
This fall, Las Lomas joined a growing roster of schools around the country teaching students the ins and outs of city planning through lessons developed by the nonprofit Urban Land Institute and UC Berkeley.

Advanced Placement government classes generally cover the federal system, said teacher Andy Briggs. Through the four-week UrbanPlan boot camp, students learn how projects gain approval at the local level through city hall.

"This is more like a civics lesson," Briggs said.

Their assignment: to revitalize a once vibrant and bustling neighborhood now turned decrepit eyesore in a fictitious Yorktown. Once divided into teams, students adopt the role of site planner, city liaison, neighborhood liaison, financial analyst or marketing director.

Together, they must revamp an ailing urban area while balancing the needs of the city, residents, and neighborhood groups. In this case, they include Skate On!, a group of politically active skateboarders looking for a good bowl to carve, and Jobs & Justice, a group pushing for more affordable housing.

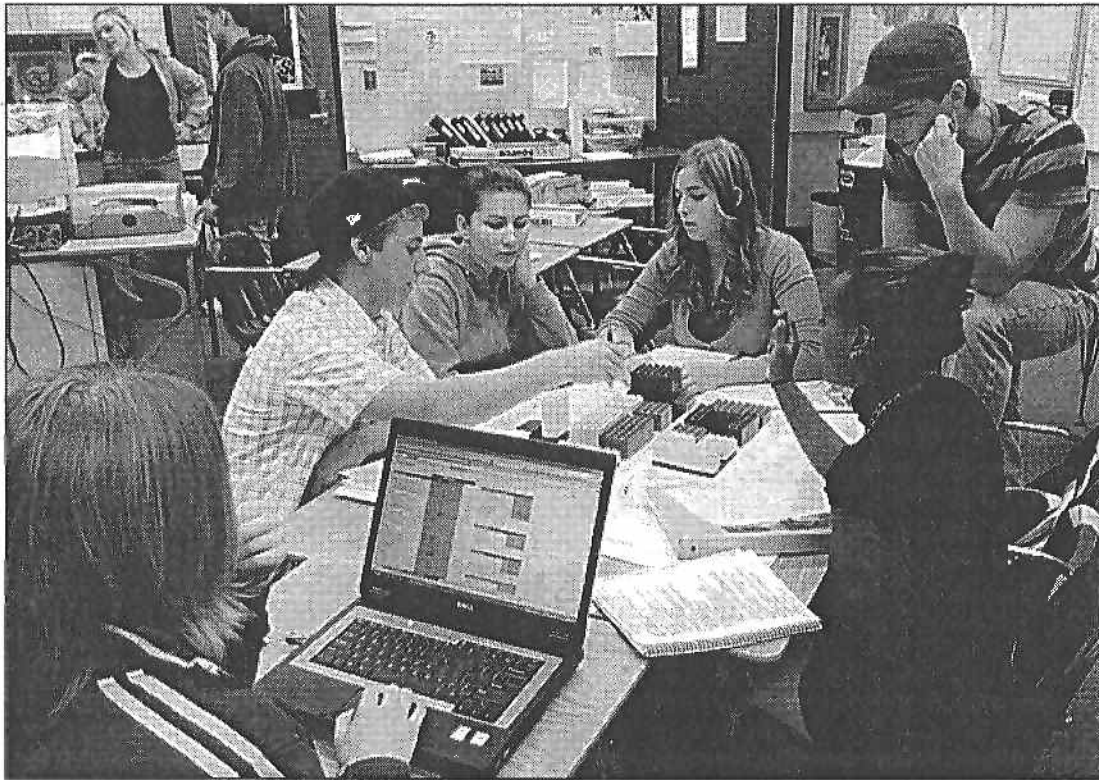


BOB PEPPING/TIMES

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BLAKE MCMILLAN looks down planned city streets in an urban planning class Wednesday at Los Lomas High in Walnut Creek.

"What we want the students to know is that they can influence what's built, how it's built." — Marisla Jarvis, director of the UrbanPlan program



BOB PEPPING/TIMES

A **TEAM** of students works Wednesday on designing an imaginary downtown during class at Las Lomas High in Walnut Creek.

Planning

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For students on the Transformer Designs team, the toughest challenge was choosing a layout of the neighborhood. At one point, they made Elmwood entirely symmetrical but canned the idea after the revenues failed to hit the 15 percent mark set by the city.

"We rearranged the map so many times," said senior Sara Noii.

Samantha Ondrade, 16, waded through letters from special interest groups to see which ideas served the best interest of the city. Her team, Project Meyhem, ultimately heeded those with the most political clout — sometimes compromising her

own values.

"Most of the time," Ondrade said, "I didn't agree."

In the process, all students learned about property taxes, zoning and absorption rates, which in this case have nothing to do with paper towels and everything to do with the time it takes to fill space in a condominium or a business park.

Just like developers competing for a city contract, they were grilled by a panel on their choice of retail, their exclusion or inclusion of a homeless shelter run by Grace Memorial and their use of greenspace, known in regular English as "parks."

Unlike real developers, many teams created a mascot. Transformer Designs crafted a robot from the same Duplo blocks used to construct a model. Project Meyhem chose a chicken wear-

ing a beret, wraparound sunglasses and a skinny black tie.

Meyhem won out.

"In the end, what we want the students to know is that they can influence what's built, how it's built," said Marisita Jarvis, director of the UrbanPlan program for the institute's San Francisco Council. "They become aware participating has a benefit."

Students say when they walk down the street, they now see their city through new eyes.

"I used to think, 'Why doesn't Walnut Creek put in more stuff for teenagers to do?'" said senior Tanya Omdo, 17. "Now I can see it from all sides."

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