

[← Back to Original Article](#)

New Chapman Plans Rile Neighbors : Orange College's Chief Tries to Still Old Towne's Fears

June 13, 1989 | JEAN DAVIDSON | Times Staff Writer

Before Chapman College officials announced plans to construct three new buildings on the Orange campus, Acting President James Doti took an unusual step: He called the leader of a neighborhood historical preservation group to alert him to the proposed expansion.

According to Doti, his recent call to Dale Rahn, president of the Old Towne Preservation Assn., was the latest in a concerted effort to improve relations with neighborhood residents who have bitterly opposed the college's previous plans for growth.

Rahn, however, viewed it differently: "They fire the gun and let you know the bullet is going to hit you. I guess that's good faith to them."

'An Armed Struggle'

The battle between college officials and residents of the Old Towne neighborhood--a conflict that one Chapman partisan termed "an armed struggle"--began three years ago, when the college announced plans to build a 67-foot classroom tower at Center Street and Sycamore Avenue.

Chapman eventually won city approval for a slightly smaller building--62 feet--but the college let the plans lapse without explanation.

A wary peace settled until May 28, when Chapman executives revealed plans during the college's commencement for a \$23-million building campaign.

The proposal, which threatens to put the school at odds with neighbors again, includes an academic building, a student union and a dormitory totaling 160,000 square feet altogether.

Although the college's master plan calls for buildings in some campus areas to reach heights of 62 feet, residents continue to complain that high-rise buildings would not be in harmony with the neighborhood of Victorian and early California-style one- and two-story homes and businesses.

They also fear that their historic neighborhood, which has shrunk in the last decade as the college has bought and razed dozens of houses, will be swallowed up by college growth.

"We don't oppose a reasonable expansion," said Joe Suste, a preservation association member and owner of a 1909 home just a few blocks from Chapman. "But we don't want it to be at our expense."

President Doti and college board Chairman George Argyros, a multimillionaire developer and owner of the Seattle Mariners, insisted that construction will be executed with concern for the people and character of Orange's oldest community. The proposed buildings are needed to relieve overcrowding and will conform to height and space limits in the master plan, they said.

"Over the last 10 years, we've spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on renovation of our oldest buildings," Doti said. "Now, we are strategically positioned to move forward more ambitiously in major construction projects."

'Playing Catch-Up'

"Student enrollment and faculty have grown in the last 10 years, and we're running out of space. Our last new building was completed in 1977. This is, in a sense, playing catch-up."

Mayor Don E. Smith, who said he has been a mediator in many town-gown disputes, blamed "poor communication" for past problems.

"The residents feel that any building affects their quality of life, because of the traffic and the additional people it would draw," he said. "But the college is here, and the people of Orange would like to see the college remain here. They need to be allowed to grow."

Chapman, a liberal-arts college founded by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Woodland 128 years ago, was welcomed by Old Towne residents in 1954, when the college moved to the pillared, Greek-style buildings that once made up the Orange Unified School District.

Over the years, the college converted the former high school auto shop into a student union, built a dozen classroom and student residence buildings and bought more than 50 homes on surrounding tree-lined streets.

Two-Thirds in Old Towne

Two-thirds of today's campus is within Old Towne, a mile-square district roughly bordered by Walnut Avenue on the north, Cambridge Street on the east, Palmyra and LaVeta avenues to the south and Batavia Street on the west. The neighborhood surrounds Orange's downtown historic district and includes about 1,400 houses built before 1940 and half a dozen listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Relations among residents, students and Chapman administrators became strained during the 1980s as a new generation of homeowners began to renovate the once-weary Old Towne houses. Along with college growth--from 1,588 undergraduate and graduate students in 1980 to 2,185 last fall--came complaints about

too many noisy student parties, too little street parking for residents and too much traffic.

Mild disputes simmered until early 1986 when plans for the proposed classroom building galvanized members of the Old Towne Preservation Assn. into a united opposition. Resentment erupted over the college's steady creep into the residential area. Neighbors protested that the college had converted once-private homes to businesses, sometimes without city permits, and had demolished dozens of homes to make way for buildings and parking lots.

Threat to Move From Orange

The battle escalated until late in 1986, when Argyros and Chapman's then-president, G.T. (Buck) Smith, threatened to move the college from its 38-acre campus to an undisclosed location in southern Orange County.

The college-community struggle, which became an issue in the city elections in November, 1986, was seemingly resolved a month later, when the newly seated City Council voted unanimously to allow the classroom building.

Those plans were dropped, Doti said, when Chapman shifted its focus to include greater concern for student life outside the classroom, with priority given to more dormitory space and on-campus recreation areas. A master plan, hammered out over more than a year of meetings and public hearings, permits the college to build to heights of 62 feet in an area of the campus near Glassell Street and Sycamore Avenue but limits construction heights to 55 feet elsewhere on campus.

The city-approved master plan also allows the college to triple its building space--from 540,000 square feet to 1.5 million square feet--but requires that 30% of the campus be preserved for open areas or recreation space. Student capacity is limited under the plan to 2,500 pupils at any one time. As long as proposed buildings conform to the master plan, only an administrative review is needed for approval.

Argyros, a 1959 Chapman graduate who has guided the college for 14 years through force of personality and monetary gifts, attributed past conflicts to the lack of a master plan.

Now that such a plan is in place, he said, ground breaking for the new buildings could take place later this year.

Potential community opposition "is not really an issue," Argyros said, adding: "You'll always have your detractors, and we have tried to work with everyone."

Doti and Tom Beck, associate vice president of planning, have offered to meet with leaders of the preservation association and a second community group, Concerned Citizens of the Orange-Chapman Neighborhood, to discuss building plans and other concerns.

Next, Argyros said, the college will look for more land on which to grow. Chapman recently closed escrow on a home at 216 Walnut St. and another at 545 Grand Ave., which gives it ownership of a block that will be razed for a planned dormitory. Eventually, the college also hopes to build a new all-faith chapel and expand the library and drama building.

"We have to acquire some additional property there over time, and we're doing that," Argyros said. "We've been acquiring parcels as they become available. . . . We have a shortage of land area and the problem of trying to develop a private college without condemnation in a (developed) area.

Enhance 'Living Environment'

"We're a small college," he said, "and what we're trying to do is enhance our quality and our living environment."

But the college's expansion could determine where the neighborhood ends up. While neighbors acknowledge the benefits the college affords the community--in meeting space, recreational areas, as well as student concerts and plays--they anxiously await details on the planned construction and remain fearful of its potential negative impact.

Chapman has demolished an estimated 40 homes in the last decade. Residents view further purchases as encroachment, Rahn said. Old Towne homes, which range in price from about \$190,000 to \$350,000, include housing stock that is considered relatively affordable in the high-priced county market.

"The college is expanding lot by lot throughout the neighborhood and forcing area residents out of their homes," he said. "We want to make sure that any new buildings are compatible with the neighborhood and that the neighborhood is protected."