

VISTA CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

We transform the school experience

2900 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90026
T 213 269-4767 | F 213 269-4762
www.vistacharterpublicschools.org

Don Wilson Ed.D., Superintendent
Collin Felch, Ed.D., Deputy Superintendent
Karen Amaya, Assistant Superintendent



December 15, 2023

Dear City Council Members,

My name is Don Wilson, Superintendent of Vista Charter Public Schools. We operate Vista Meridian Global Academy and are eager to serve the Costa Mesa community.

Our application for a Conditional Use Permit was submitted to the city in January 2023. We spent this past year outreaching to local businesses and residents, conducting extensive traffic and parking surveys and strategies, and designing a first class school campus that best serves our students while also being a good local neighbor.

Despite a positive staff recommendation and the extensive support from the community, including the Costa Mesa Chamber of Commerce, our application was denied by the Planning Commission. Our project is now appealed to the City Council, and we are scheduled to be heard at the January 16, 2024 meeting. I am writing to ask for your support and to invite you to meet with our team to better understand our commitment to the city and our extensive work to meet all the land use conditions that were required by the city.

Please also note that I reached out again to the Newport Mesa Unified School District Superintendent Dr. Wesley Smith recently and had a very productive conversation. There were a number of inaccurate data points presented during the Planning Commission meeting and it was important to us to discuss these numbers with the Superintendent. We also reiterated to him our desire to work collaboratively with the District as we jointly seek to provide quality educational options for all Costa Mesa students.

I look forward to the opportunity to discuss with you our school, and our application, in more detail. Please contact me personally at (310) 428-0539 to arrange a time convenient with your schedule.

Sincerely,

Don Wilson, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Vista Charter Public Schools

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January 5, 2024

Dear Mayor and City Councilmembers;

As you are aware our CUP application is coming before you for consideration at the January 16, 2024 City Council meeting. Earlier I wrote to you to introduce myself and our school, Vista Meridian Public Charter High School. I am sending this follow up correspondence to provide additional information about our property and the extensive land use and entitlement process we went through with city staff to ensure that we would be good neighbors in the community and mitigated any issues or concerns about our school operations. I am also making myself available again to meet with you to tour our site or to schedule a phone call or meeting to answer any additional questions you may have about this item.

First and foremost I want to reiterate that Vista is a free, public high school available to any Costa Mesa student who believes our school mission and objectives meet their educational needs. We currently operate a school in Santa Ana and are interested in expanding into Costa Mesa with a 500 student body enrollment at our site located at 1620 Sunflower Avenue. Our student population in Santa Ana is currently 94% hispanic and we recognize that our new school in Costa Mesa could have similar demographics. I've attached my previous communication which highlights again the focus of our academics and our commitment to excellence for our students and families.

Our CUP application includes the conversion of an existing 37,455 sf, two-story office building to a public charter school on an existing developed site. Our proposal includes the remodeling of an existing building and minor ancillary site improvements to meet current building code standards for educational use. No physical expansion of the building footprint or increase in height is proposed. The site has ample onsite parking and a vehicle queuing lane to facilitate the proposed use. It is important to reiterate here that the property owner, Mr. Tim Nguyen is eager to have this project approved. Since the pandemic his building has been vacant, and office and commercial uses are not in demand. Activating this property with a vibrant school use not only creates economic value to the owner, but to this area of the city that is ripe for redevelopment. Given the recently approved residential uses in the area, and the positive outreach and support we received from the Harbor Gateway/Segerstrom Business Park, SOCO, Rose Equities, as well as the Costa Mesa Chamber of Commerce, we believe our project is a good fit for this corridor.

I want to assure you that we engaged a team of qualified professionals who worked for over a year with the city to bring forth a solid application that has been recommended for approval by city staff. The City independently conducted an extensive Transportation Impact Analysis that evaluated Vista's onsite drop-off and pick-up program, onsite vehicle queuing and circulation, potential for any impacts to offsite roadways and intersections, and Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT). The report concluded that at full student capacity, the City's streets and intersections would continue to operate at an acceptable Level of Service (LOS). As such, the report found that no offsite improvements were needed to City streets or

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intersections. Additionally, the report confirmed that the project was considered to have a less than significant impact on VMT with no mitigation measures required. Please note that none of our students are permitted to drive to campus and park. Vista anticipates up to 40% of its students would utilize school-provided transportation services with others participating in its “Bike-to-School Program” due to the site’s proximity to the Santa Ana River Trail.

As for consideration under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), city staff confirmed and recommended the project be categorically exempt from the provisions of CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15301. The project consists only of the repair, maintenance, and/or minor alteration of existing structures involving negligible or no expansion of the use beyond that existing at the time of this determination. Importantly, the project is consistent with the Industrial Park land use designation in the General Plan that states “Institutional uses may also be appropriate, provided that land use compatibility and traffic issues have been addressed. Institutional uses will require discretionary approval.” The project site is approximately 2.168 acres in size, is located within an urban area, and can be adequately served by all required utilities and public services. The project is consistent with all General Plan designations and policies, and is consistent with all applicable zoning regulations upon approval of the requested entitlement. As designed, the project will not have significant environmental impacts related to traffic, noise, air quality, and water quality. In addition, pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2 (c), none of the six exceptions to the use of a categorical exemption apply to the project.

In summary, our school is dedicated to providing quality educational services and being a good non-profit organization in Costa Mesa. I am happy to discuss further and will make myself available at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Don Wilson, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Vista Charter Public Schools

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Vista Meridian Eyes New High School

BY YUIKA YOSHIDA

JANUARY 8, 2024

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Vista Meridian expected to lease two-story office building at 1620 Sunflower Ave.

Santa Ana charter school Vista Meridian Global Academy is looking to open a new high school at a Costa Mesa office park, after it gains approval from city officials.

Vista Meridian late last year held meetings with the Costa Mesa Planning Commission to discuss turning a 37,455-square-foot office space at 1620 Sunflower Ave. into a school for 500 students.

The school said the project, located a few blocks north of the San Diego (405) Freeway, received positive initial responses from the commission's office, but faced opposition during the hearing.

Part of the opposition references an ongoing national debate over charter schools and whether they take money away from district schools.

Don Wilson, superintendent of Vista Charter Public Schools, clarified that charter schools are free public schools that receive per-pupil-funding from the state.

“In California, the money follows the student,” Wilson told the Business Journal.

The school has worked out a long-term lease with the building’s owner Tim Nguyen, founder of Costa Mesa financial services software maker MeridianLink Inc. (NYSE: MLNK), which is contingent on receiving the conditional use permit from the city.

Terms of the agreement were undisclosed “out of respect to the owner,” according to Wilson.

The school hopes to gain city approval by Jan. 16, so it can get to work installing necessary upgrades in time to open next fall, top officials at the school said.

Premier Location

The charter school plans to set up the high school in an area of Costa Mesa that has seen a high amount of real estate activity as of late.

The two-story office building where the school is looking to lease, part of a two-building complex, is directly across the street from high-end shopping center South Coast Collection, or SoCo, which sold for a reported \$110 million to Baltimore-based Continental Realty Corp. in November.

Nearby is the development site for One Metro West, a 16-acre mixed-use project set to break ground in late 2024 or the first quarter of 2025, according to company officials. It would be built at the current site of an industrial building that sits alongside the 405 Freeway that’s leased to Sakura Paper. It was sold late last year by local businessman Joe Wen for a reported \$72 million.

The move into Costa Mesa will prove beneficial not only for the school, but also the city, Wilson said.

“I think having a school with 500 families attending will bring a positive economic impact to the surrounding businesses,” Wilson said.

Career Pathways

This will be Vista Charter Public Schools’ fifth school.

Vista Charter Public Schools was founded in 2010 and currently serves students in Los Angeles, Anaheim and Santa Ana.

Vista Charter Public Schools opened its first middle school in Los Angeles before expanding to include elementary and high school levels.

“Our goal has always been providing an education for kids from transitional kindergarten all the way through high school,” Wilson said.

The Santa Ana location for Vista Meridian Global Academy was built to serve pre-kindergarten through eighth grade students, but has also temporarily doubled as a high school for freshman, sophomore and junior students.

This new building in Costa Mesa will allow the charter school to establish an official high school for these students.

The countywide charter petition for Vista Meridian Global Academy was approved by the Orange County Board of Education on June 1, 2022.

Many of Vista Charter Public Schools’ students are economically disadvantaged, according to top officials.

The school aims to provide its students with career pathways in fields that are harder to break into such as cybersecurity and biomedical sciences.

Vista Charter Public Schools partnered with local colleges Santa Ana College and Orange Coast College so students can earn credits toward an associate degree in these fields while in high school.

Director of counseling, college and careers Catherine Real, who previously served as principal of Vista Meridian Global Academy, also helps facilitate internships for students.

MeridianLink Ties

The building was originally intended to be used by MeridianLink, founded by Nguyen, who owns both buildings in the industrial park.

Nguyen bought the property for \$9.4 million back in April 2019, filings indicate.

Shortly after the purchase, the building sat vacant due to the pandemic, and MeridianLink employees working remotely from home.

The software company has its headquarters at another office in the city.

Vista Charter Public Schools met Nguyen through the philanthropic work he does through eKadence Learning Foundation, which provides schools with systems management software for free.

“He had an empty office building that he put significant capital into and wanted to give back to the community,” Colin Felch, deputy superintendent of Vista Charter Public Schools, said.

School officials say the space is a perfect fit because of the collaborative setting that will prepare students for the “kinds of places they be working at in four to eight years.”

Some of the building’s amenities include a cafeteria, multiple gymnasiums and an indoor tennis court.