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Lamorinda Schools Forced to Look Again at Parcel Tax

By Sophie Braccini

At the December 7 meeting of the Governing Board of the Moraga School District, board members discussed a new parcel tax to bring in much-needed funds to the district. At the same time, Lafayette School District Superintendent Fred Brill indicated that his district will be conducting a poll in early 2011 to study the feasibility of placing a parcel tax measure on the June ballot. While in Orinda, the uncertainty created by the abysmal State deficit, and the resulting cuts, is forcing the otherwise financially solid school district to revisit the question.

The three districts are all grateful of the tremendous effort of Lamorinda communities to compensate for the deterioration of State support, but they continue to be challenged by uncertainty. "We have a new governor in office, and we do not know what kind of budget will be presented in the month to come," said Moraga School District (MSD) Superintendent Bruce Burns. "Our financial status is strong, but our outlook may change within a month when the new governor presents his budget," confirmed Jerry Bucci, Director of Business Services for the Orinda Union School District (OUSD).

In 2004, a \$325 per parcel tax, with no sunset, was approved in Moraga. The yearly \$1.8 million it produced first allowed the District to constitute a \$200,000 reserve per year. But for three years now, MSD has had to tap into that reserve to compensate for diminishing State funding and cost increases. Projections indicate that the reserve will be exhausted by the 2013-2014 school year.

Last October the MSD Board appointed a Fiscal Advisory Committee that looked at cost reductions and possible increased revenues. "The district has made efforts to cut expenses and saved \$600,000," said Burns. In Lafayette, "We have lost \$1,000 per student in State funding," indicated Brill, "over the past three years, the Governing Board has cut over two million dollars from our budget." But the two superintendents believe that this will not be enough. "The State may face an \$18 billion deficit over the next 18 months," said Brill, "huge cuts will have to be made, and schools will be impacted." Brill believes that to continue to satisfy a community that has high expectations for its schools, class size should not be increased; the school year should not be shortened; instructional aid should be maintained; arts, music and science programs should not be cut; and student support should be preserved.

"To lessen the impact of the ongoing State budget crisis and stave off draconian cuts to our educational program, the Board and administration are exploring a parcel tax measure to be placed on a ballot this spring. The Board is sensitive to the economic challenges that many families and businesses are facing, and is being extremely thoughtful about the timing and amount of any tax measure," wrote Brill in a December letter to parents.

Polling company True North Research has been hired by the Lafayette School District and will provide input to the Board in late January regarding residents' positions on a new tax. If the response is positive, a measure could be placed on a mail-in ballot in June of 2011.

MSD and OUSD are not as far along in the process, since neither district anticipates exhausting their reserves earlier than 2013 or 2014, but preliminary work could start rapidly. "For such matters it is better not to be pressured by a timeline," said new MSD Board member Kathy Ranstrom, who recommended the creation of a committee to start exploring options now. Burns proposed that a steering committee be assembled in January and appealed to volunteers in the community.

"We are just beginning our reflection," said OUSD's Bucci, "this is something that we may consider in two years and that our Fiscal Advisory Committee is looking at." Actions in Sacramento in January may accelerate these decisions. "The uncertainty created by the State is our major concern," concluded Bucci.

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