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Measure A, Coming Soon to Moraga Voters

By *Sophie Braccini*

When Superintendent Bruce Burns stands in front of an audience to present facts about the Moraga School District (MSD), he is not shy about pointing out the achievements of the district he's led for a little over two years. Burns does not campaign—there is a team of parent volunteers who do that—he talks about MSD's financial needs and answers questions regarding the new parcel tax, Measure A. Sometimes he and those who work on the Yes on A campaign are met with skepticism. But in a town that draws many of its residents for its schools, they find a lot of comprehension and support. The question is: will that support tally the two-thirds votes needed to pass Measure A? "We are one of the top-rated districts in California," said Burns during a meeting with the Moraga Chamber of Commerce. "We've been able to maintain small class sizes and retain very qualified personnel. We educate the whole child and introduce innovative programs, and all this in spite of declining State funding."

It is estimated that MSD lost State funding in the magnitude of \$6.6 million over the last four years.

"Over the past five years the district has cut \$1,210,790 of yearly expense in response to the state budget crisis," said Michael Holbrook, a MSD parent and member of the Measure A marketing campaign team. MSD's budget for the coming year includes almost \$400K in additional cuts and uses \$700K of reserves.

Holbrook, who described himself as fiscally conservative, is fast to point out that he was impressed by the district's frugality. "What sold me is how the last two superintendents have managed the funds," he said, "MSD gets less funding per student than many other school districts in California. Through cuts and with support from parents, the district has been able to maintain its excellence and innovative programs. But come 2013-14, it is likely that cuts will have to be made in the classrooms if Measure A does not pass—small class size, teacher assistants, and enrichment programs could be affected."

Whether they have children enrolled in MSD or not, many residents are coming out in favor of Measure A. John Mattson's children, now grown, all went through the Moraga public school system. "We've always appreciated the quality of education in Moraga and Lamorinda," said Mattson, adding that as an orthopedic surgeon he recognizes the importance of education as an investment: "This is important for our future, for our children, and for our property values," said the longtime Moraga resident.

"Our schools are the main differentiator for our community," said realtor and Moraga resident Ben Olsen. "We have some disadvantages compared to Walnut Creek in terms of shopping and entertainment, and what ultimately makes young families chose Moraga are the schools. Investing in the schools makes a lot of sense."

Last time Moragans voted on school parcel tax, in 2004, it passed on a slim margin of about 20 votes. Not everyone believes that more money means better results in schools, and in the current economy some might find it difficult to pay an additional \$18.75 a month.

"Don't you already have a parcel tax for the School District?" asked Moraga property owner Joan Bruzzzone during the Chamber meeting. "Why do you need an additional parcel tax, doesn't it automatically go up?"

"The parcel tax that was voted in 2004 remains at the same level, while costs increase and what we receive from the State continues to significantly decrease," responded Burns. "When it (the 2004 parcel tax) was voted in it was scheduled to cover our expenditures for seven years, and through savings we were able to extend its impact for three more years." Measure A is intended to keep the schools solvent for another five to eight years.

Measure A in a Nutshell

Annual parcel tax: \$225 per parcel

Needs a 2/3 majority

No sunset, no inflation clause

Deadline to postmark ballot: May 8, 2012

Total annual additional income for MSD: \$1,271,250

Independent Citizens Oversight Committee: included

Low income seniors can ask to be exempt

MSD's total annual revenue last year: Approximately \$15 million

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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