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Moraga School District Pins its Hopes on Measure B

By Sophie Braccini



Bruce Burns calls this ballot measure the most significant event of his career as superintendent of the Moraga School District. Measure B on the November ballot must succeed, according to Burns, because failure would mean the end of Moraga schools as we know them.

Burns makes this dramatic statement because a previous parcel tax for the schools failed a year and a half ago and if the district does not get additional funding it will face a \$900,000 deficit for the 2014-15 school year, an unacceptable fate that will instead translate into cuts that could affect everything from class size to libraries, technology and extra-curricular activities.

A team of volunteers, led by school board member Kathy Ranstrom and parent Nancy Kendzierski, are drumming up support for the needed two-thirds majority vote on the measure.

"We worked with a polling company, True North, and listened to feedback from the community to understand the reason the previous measure failed," says Burns. "We learned that the last measure's no-sunset clause was not supported, so this time we are proposing a temporary

measure (six years), and we are also asking a little bit less; that too is in response to feedback from the community."

Measure B asks for a tax of \$192 per parcel that will provide the school district with a little more than \$1 million a year. The tax will allow the district to stop deficit spending. This year the board will spend \$110,000 of its \$2 million reserve in order to maintain services at the current level.

The school district says having funding sources that are independent of the state is absolutely necessary. For five years now, state resources have diminished and even the recent passage of a statewide tax for California schools will not allow Moraga to recover for several years. "Voters passed the governor's initiative that is aimed at giving school districts as much money as they received in 2007-08," explains Ranstrom. "What school districts get is based on the number of special needs students they have. In Moraga we have few, which means that the plan for Moraga is to get to the 2007-08 level of funding by the school year 2020-21." She adds that this projection is based on eight consecutive years of income tax growth for the state. "There are a lot of big 'ifs' out there," she acknowledges.

If approved, the Measure B parcel tax would go into effect July 1, 2014. At this time Orinda residents pay \$509 per parcel for their schools, Lafayette residents \$528; this new tax would bring Moraga residents' contributions to \$517.

Burns adds that the district has cut all of the administrative services it possibly could, and that all of the money from the tax will go to fund only educational services. "If the measure does not pass we would have to take drastic measures," says the superintendent.

The school board has studied what the consequences of no parcel tax would be. "Class size, that's now at 24, would go to 28 - maybe 32 in some classes," Burns explains. "That's what the state provides for, that's what is found in districts such as the Mount Diablo School District." He adds that the programs and the extra-curricular activities that contribute to a positive atmosphere at schools and add to the quality of the educational experience for students would have to be cut, citing Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School as one example of the district's success. "There is so much going on at JM now in terms of school climate with SSA, iKind, WEB, programs that didn't exist five or six years ago," says Burns. "Parents have a very positive opinion of our schools, and it is because of everything we have done over the past years."

The school board decided to go for a fall election rather than spring because it is easier to mobilize the volunteers who have already begun calling registered voters and going door-to-door. The Moraga Education Foundation has postponed its usual fall phone-a-thon. "We do not want to confuse people," said Kim Matranga, MEF president. "We will resume our fundraising campaign at the beginning of next year."

The PTAs of all four Moraga schools, the Moraga Town Council, and numerous businesses and residents have endorsed Measure B. For more information, visit www.moragayesonb.com.

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