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School Enrollments are Growing

By Cathy Tyson



The author of this article, pictured above with classmates in 1967, was a student at Los Perales School in Moraga. The school opened in 1965, but due to declining enrollments closed its doors in 1983; it re-opened in 1997 after a bond was passed to reopen it. Photo provided

Are there more school-aged children in Lamorinda than there used to be? The crush of kids on minimum days buying snacks is a tipoff – along with traffic heading to schools – that young families are certainly drawn to Lamorinda's green hills and great schools, and as existing homes gradually turn over, and new developments in various stages of completion open, it's expected that school enrollments will continue to rise, which is causing some concern among long-term residents.

Several factors impact school enrollment: Obviously, the amount of housing matters, but also birth trends, in-migration, out-migration, student transfers, charter schools, private schools and home schooled students all play a role in the equation. Boasting excellent reputations, and consistently high academic rankings, area schools are certainly an enticement.

For the last school year, 2013-14, Lafayette had the largest enrollment of students in kindergarten through eighth grade with a total of 3,469 kids. Orinda had 2,482 students for the same period and Moraga had 1,845 students. Each of Lamorinda's three towns is wrestling with what to make of the uptick in new students, anticipating a growing number of kids hungry for knowledge.

"The Lafayette Elementary School District should experience moderate enrollment growth over the next five to ten years," stated the district's 2014 demographic report. The study projected that the previous peak enrollment which occurred in the 1999-00 school year will be exceeded in 2016-17, reaching a total enrollment of 3,588 students, and it expects enrollment to continue growing, reaching an estimated total of 3,727 students by the fall of 2023.

Taking an overall look at school facilities, the report concluded that based on current school capacities, it may be necessary to adjust attendance boundaries and/or add classrooms to existing schools.

"It is, however, advised that the

District update its enrollment projections regularly to account for actual changes and to ensure the accuracy of near term projections at least every two years," the report cautioned.

Lafayette is poised for growth in the near future, but as of today, only the Marquis Townhomes project at the site of the former Hungry Hunter restaurant is complete. But the luxury project, The Woodbury, near the Veterans Hall, is under construction, the 69-unit multi-family KB Home project behind Panda Express is slated to break ground this year, and the controversial Terraces of Lafayette project, now called The Homes at Deer Hill, near Acalanes High School, is still going through the city's review process for its 44-single family homes.

In Orinda, Loreen Farrell, director of business services for the Orinda Union School District reported that "we received several primary-aged students who are residing in homes located within the new Pine Grove development, which was a bit unexpected." She also notes there were several inter-district agreements in the middle grades. "With the sudden increase in home sales and construction within our District, we are updating our demographic study in order to have the most up-to-date information to work with for planning purposes."

Being voted the second most friendly town in America by Forbes magazine surely doesn't hurt its popularity, but the dozen new luxury homes at Orinda Oaks, Pulte Homes' sold out Pine Grove, now called Orinda Grove development, or the many still undeveloped lots at the massive Wilder project have and will continue to add to the student population in town.

The same scenario, only a bit slower, is happening in Moraga. "After several years of declining enrollment, the Moraga School District enrollment increased, and has been generally flat the last three years. The District has experienced a trend the

past few years of enrollment increasing throughout the school year. I would not be surprised if today's current enrollment of 1,853 is 10-20 higher by the end of the school year," said Bruce Burns, superintendent of the Moraga School District.

Residents have seen story poles sprout up at a number of sites around town, indicating potential developments, but none have broken ground. Change can be challenging; each potential development has received robust public feedback.

While there may always be friction over municipal growth, that's the heritage of Lamorinda. As the area first developed, the rate of growth was astonishing. In 1960, when Eisenhower was president, Orinda had a booming population of 4,712 souls according to the census; fast forward 20 years and the 1980 census noted the population more than tripled to 16,825.

Lafayette was slightly bigger back in 1960 with 7,114 people; 20 years later it skyrocketed to 20,879.

Moraga wasn't even counted in the 1960 census but it went from roughly a wide spot in the road to 15,014 people in two decades. Surprisingly, for the next half century, from 1960 all the way to 2010, Moraga's population grew by a whopping 1,002 people, up to 16,016.

Looking to the future, California's population will continue to grow, and as land becomes more valuable, developers will likely continue to seek the green hills and great schools that brought existing residents here in the first place.



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