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Published January 21st, 2008

## School Parcel Tax-a Perpetual Bandaid

By Andrea A. Firth

Once considered a temporary measure to address the State's public education funding shortfalls, the parcel tax has become an integral piece of the school budgeting pie according to many school administrators, parents, and residents in Lamorinda. "It was hoped that it would be an interim fix to address the school funding crisis [following the passage of Proposition 13]," states Sue Severson, who served on the Orinda Union School District (OUSD) Governing Board from 1994 through 2002. However, as the State's budget crises and cuts have cycled repeatedly over the years, she has supported multiple parcel tax measures in Orinda. "By 2002, it became clear that there was a consistent need for local school funding and control of those monies," she adds.

The parcel tax fix is not without detractors. Some complain that the flat rate tax places an unfair burden on small property owners, seniors, and others on fixed incomes. And, some just do not like to see any more tax increases for local schools or otherwise.

Each of the four public school districts that serve Lamorinda has a parcel tax in place. The inclusion or exclusion of an escalator clause, sunset provision, or senior exemption make it so no two parcel taxes are exactly the same. However, the bar for passage of any school parcel tax is set high requiring 2/3 or 66.7% voter approval, so raising or renewing the parcel tax is never guaranteed.

OUSD. The OUSD has placed \$124 parcel tax measure on the upcoming March 3rd special election ballot. The measure includes no sunset provision and the senior exemption is restricted to low-income seniors. If passed, the tax will be an add-on to the existing parcel tax, which passed in 2003 with 75% of voters in support, and result in a total school parcel tax contribution of \$509 per parcel.

Parcel tax measures and fundraising through the Educational Foundation and parents clubs are the only mechanisms left to create a revenue stream to meet the budget requirements in the face of the State funding deficit according to Riki Sorenson, President of the OUSD Board of Trustees. "We are just trying to stay even with what we should receive from the State," states Sorenson. OUSD Superintendent Dr. Joe Jaconette concurs, noting that local financial support is the only way the District can manage through the fluctuations of the State funding process and continue to deliver a high quality education program.

Some critics of the proposed parcel tax point to the pending \$25 million deal with Pulte Developers for the District's Pine Grove property and question the need for additional money. The money from the Pine Grove deal, as mandated by the State, can only be used for capital improvements, maintenance, and facility needs according to Sorenson and may not be used for ongoing expenses such as teachers' salaries. A recent report identified \$90 million in facilities and maintenance needs across the OUSD schools.

AUHSD. Acalanes High School District (AUHSD) may be next in line to place a parcel tax measure on the ballot for voter approval. AUHSD's current \$189 per parcel tax is scheduled to expire in June of 2011, and the Governing Board and others have raised the issue of renewing the parcel tax sooner, even as early as June of this year. The current tax generates annual revenue of \$6.7 million and includes a senior exemption without income requirement. The amount of the proposed parcel tax has not been determined and will be discussed at upcoming meetings of the Governing Board.

LAFSD. Measure J-the Lafayette School district parcel tax-was passed with 73% voter support in November of 2007. The \$313 per parcel tax includes a 3% annual increase and sunsets in 2014. The senior exemption is available to senior citizens who are 65 years or older and who own and occupy a home in Lafayette as a principal residence.

MSD. Moraga School District's \$325 per parcel tax was passed in March of 2004 squeaking by with 66.8% of voters in favor. Unlike the previous parcel tax, the current MSD parcel tax includes no sunset clause. "The District went for a 'permanent' parcel tax because stability in funding sources was a high priority," notes Superintendent Rick Schafer. "The committee recognized that the proposed parcel tax was for maintaining current programs, not adding new programs or enhancements-accordingly, stability was critical," he adds.

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