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Lamorinda Schools: What's on the Chopping Block?

Budgeting in Uncertain Times

By Andrea A. Firth

"This is the worst budget that I have seen in my 35-year career," stated Jim Negri, Superintendent of the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) at the last Governing Board meeting, which was attended by over 150 concerned parents, teachers, and students. "Every student, staff member, and family will be impacted. We will not be doing school as we have done it in the past," he explained one week later to another auditorium packed with concerned stakeholders attending a Special Meeting of the Board convened to solicit public comment.

"There is a tremendous amount of uncertainty," said Orinda Union School District (OUSD) Superintendent Joe Jaconette as he and the OUSD Board of Trustees listened to two hours of public comment on proposed program and personnel reductions at their February meeting.

"This is the worst case scenario. This is not where we want to go," declared Rick Schafer, Superintendent of the Moraga School District (MSD) as he reviewed the proposed list and prioritization of cuts planned for his district. Over 60 parents and teachers attended the Board meeting and discussed the budget problem and potential solutions into the late evening hours.

The long delay and lack of clear information regarding State education funding has put Lafayette School District (LAFSD), and districts across the state, in an untenable situation reported Superintendent Fred Brill in an communication to parents in anticipation of the upcoming LAFSD Governing Board meeting. Brill and the LAFSD Board have also scheduled a special meeting on February 25th (4 p.m. in the Stanley Auditorium) for additional public comment on the proposed budget.

School administrators across Lamorinda have spent countless hours over the past several weeks trying to set budget priorities for the 2009-2010 school year in the face of dramatic State funding cuts, the magnitude of which remained difficult to define. While answers from the State prove elusive, Superintendents from all from all four of the public school districts are planning for the worst. Lamorinda school districts will likely be spared mid-year budget cuts due to prudent financial planning and reserves, however all four districts expect significant State funding shortfalls for the next school year. The three kindergarten through eighth grade districts estimate deficits approximating one million dollars, and the high school district faces a whopping \$5.2 million shortage. Declining enrollment in all three communities will contribute to the reduced State funding and represents \$1.3 million of AUHSD's budget gap.

Despite the many budget unknowns, districts are forced to make decisions regarding personnel cuts by March 15th in order to meet the legally mandated deadline to notice teachers and other certificated employees (e.g., librarians) who may be terminated. If the AUHSD were to act on their complete list of proposed budget reductions, the equivalent of 60 faculty members would lose jobs, and this does not include a number of classified employees, such as custodial and administrative staff, that are also on the cut list. All four districts hope that additional revenues will enable them to shorten their cut lists and save jobs. "This process is very stressful for the district's employees," states Schafer who also notes that his District faced personnel reductions last year too.

A Multi-Year Problem. The State education funding crisis could last through next year plus two more years-making it 2012 before school districts see the light

at the end of a very dark tunnel. Districts will have to manage with the cuts that are made next school year plus a lower revenue stream. If the State economy continues to decline, further cuts will be likely unless offset by other revenue sources.

Schafer anticipates that he will recommend that the MSD Board utilize some District reserves to make up for the funding shortage this year. However, he plans to avoid the situation that several districts in California may face in the next two years when they are unable to pay their bills. The State will be forced to swoop in to salvage the bankrupted districts that will then lose local control of their budgets- a situation that Moraga parents, and other Lamorinda parents, would find unacceptable.

Raising Revenues. Lamorinda schools' budget woes are compounded by the fact that the districts are designated as low-wealth districts-an oxymoron that leaves them funded at lower levels as compared to other schools in the State. Identifying additional revenue sources has been part and "parcel" of the budget discussions. OUSD has a school parcel tax on the March 3rd ballot that could ameliorate their current budget problems. AUHSD is investigating the elements and timing of a new parcel tax. And, stakeholders have asked the MSD Board to begin to explore the idea of a new parcel tax for Moraga. Lafayette's school district passed their last parcel tax less than two years ago.

Districts are also thinking "out of the box" with respect to revenue generation. OUSD plans to consider allowing more interdistrict transfers, which could add up to \$110,000 to their bottom line. The high schools may consider increases to athletic fees and reconsider their ban on advertising in the athletic stadiums. Several parents asked about using volunteers to do the work of employees who might be terminated, however education and labor laws often prohibit this trade-off. All four districts expect to rely on their fundraising groups to help backfill their deficits.

Federal Stimulus Package. All Districts have their eyes on the federal stimulus package monies for education that could help to fund special education programs that have been historically underfunded by the feds. For example, MSD spends \$900K of their general fund monies on these programs. However, Districts are waiting to see how the legislation is structured to see if the funding is earmarked for the districts or siphoned off by the State before reaching the local level.

As budget discussions continued across the Districts, parents bemoaned the loss of programs that contribute the "complete and rounded student" such as Leadership at the high school and environmental education in grade school. They questioned how teachers will manage with increased class sizes and few to no aides to help. Employees and administration sought a common solution. However, there was little finger-pointing other than toward the State.

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