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Published October 13th, 2010

Lafayette School Board Candidates

By Jean Follmer

We recently asked the candidates for the Lafayette School District Governing Board to answer the following questions on issues facing the district:

1. What financial vehicles do you feel could be most effective in dealing with the financial challenges in the district and why?
2. What are your thoughts concerning the acceptance of students from outside the district? Are you for or against and why?

Here are their answers, in their own words:

Teresa Gerring (Incumbent)

Finance

As you know, the financial problems of the District are really due to the inability of the State to solve its budget problems and fulfill its responsibility to adequately and consistently fund public education. Our choices of specific financial vehicles are shrinking, but I believe we have a number of avenues to explore:

The District should continue to efficiently manage its existing resources. We have already trimmed a lean District office, grounds and maintenance and we'll continue to look for other cost saving opportunities. I look forward to hearing the findings of our "green" energy audit due to our solar installations. We need to work with teachers and other staff to identify ways to keep cuts away from the classrooms and continue to support the innovative work that is taking place in the District and maximize our students' outcomes using established partnerships.

The District should identify additional revenue sources through grants and by sharing resources with other entities: AUHSD, surrounding districts, the City of Lafayette and the Lafayette Library & Learning Center. We need to fully develop our relationships with LASF, the Parent Organizations, local businesses and the community at large to support District programs and programs at the individual school sites. Although continued support of our schools through parcel taxes and bonds is critical, everyone needs to advocate at the State and Federal level to make funding our public schools a priority.

Transfer Students

Our first responsibility is to the students who are residents of Lafayette. Many of us moved to Lafayette because of the schools and we support our schools in many ways - including financially. Even with declining State revenue, I believe that we need to be very thoughtful about opening our doors to inter-district transfers, including Allen Bills, as a revenue source. It might seem like an easy revenue source, but we should balance that with the related costs, and the value Lafayette places on smaller class sizes. I am in favor of considering employment-related transfers if we have classroom capacity, but not of loosening our policy on inter-district transfers.

David Gerson

Finance

Traditionally the term "public school" meant a school that was wholly financed by public revenues. Today, school financing is accomplished through a public-private partnership that is now critical to maintaining the quality of Lafayette schools. I believe the State will continue to fail in its obligation to provide adequate funding, so it is in the self-interest of every parent, property owner, and business to financially support our schools. I believe the health of our community is directly tied to the health of our school system. The first step is to increase funding from the parents of the children the schools educate. My goal is to increase direct parent participation to over 90% at every school in the district. The second step is to support LASF and other education foundations that support the district's mission. And the last step is to finance the remaining shortfall through parcel taxes and general obligation bonds to maintain the quality and direction of our schools. On the expenditure side of the equation, the district must continue to tighten its belt and be good stewards of every dollar it receives.

Transfer Students

The first responsibility of the district is to maintain the quality of education for the students that live in the district. Although I support Allen Bill and inter-district transfers in concept - because they increase the amount of money the District receives from the State and, in many cases, provide a well-deserved benefit to many of our public and business employees who do not reside in the district - transfers must be considered primarily based upon the impact on the quality of the educational experience our children receive. This is a difficult process but it is incumbent upon our elected officials to do the analysis and make the tough choices. Part of this process should also include better enforcement of the residency rules so that all nonresidents use the same process to apply for admission to our schools.

Art Kapoor (Incumbent)

Finance

The district faces an ongoing financial challenge brought on by a lack of appropriate and stable funding from the State. We are already over a month into the school year and we really have no idea much funding the State will provide for this year since the State has yet to pass a budget.

The most effective financial vehicle in dealing with the District's financial challenges would be for the citizens of California to demand that the State and Legislature meet its primary obligation under the State Constitution - to adequately and appropriately fund California's public schools. But, we can't wait for the State to get its act together because we have kids in school today and they need and deserve the best education we can give them. Other than direct funding from State and Federal government, the main revenue sources are local. This includes the generosity of our parents and community who contribute a substantial amount of money to the District through LASF and Parent Clubs. The other method is through a local parcel tax that requires a 2/3-majority vote. (Lafayette currently has a parcel tax of \$332 per parcel). Without the parcel tax funding and the parent contributions, our district would be in much worse condition. We need to continue to evaluate the District's expenses and continue the excellent programs in our District while looking to additional revenue sources to address the continual State budget cuts.

Transfer Students

The number of Allen Bill transfers is low - this year we admitted 33 students under the Allen Bill and only 19 enrolled. Our total enrollment is 3,173 students. Since the parents of Allen Bill transfers work a minimum of 35 hours per week within the District boundaries, we see these parents every day in Lafayette's offices, stores and schools. They are part of our community and often contribute to our District through their businesses and through LASF. The Board has policies regarding inter-district transfers and many students are already in the District but for some reason they have moved out of Lafayette. In other cases, a child is having difficulties in their home district or a caregiver may live within our boundaries. All inter-district transfers are reviewed on a case-by-case basis whereas Allen Bills are accepted on an "all or nothing" basis. All of these decisions are always considered in light of what is best for our kids.

Berch Parker

Finance

Due to the large amount of dollars the District depends on to operate, our community needs to spend a lot of energy passing both parcel taxes and bond measures. Because of the fiscal crisis at the State level, both parcel taxes and bond measures are critical to the continued success of the District. In addition, our community can't ignore the availability of grants and the District needs to find ways to incentivize our teachers and our community members at large to research and apply for these grants themselves (in lieu of spending additional money to hire a grant writer). We need the community to continue to find new ways to bring revenue to our District.

Transfer Students

We need to make sure our classroom capacity is fully used. I do support accepting transfer students as a means of increased revenue to our District. I think the Allen Bill transfers are important because those who work here in Lafayette support our community and their children deserve to be here too.

All transfer students (including Allen Bill transfers) should be considered as a revenue source and to fill vacant classroom seats as long as the acceptance of those students does not adversely impact the needs of our students who are already here.

Saveth Soun

Finance

The parcel tax is one solution, but I don't think we should just focus on that. In addition to the parcel tax, we should be pursuing a grant writer for the District. Even if the grant writer costs \$100,000, an effective grant writer could bring in 20-30 times that amount in revenue to the District. A good grant writer could address all programs, including Character Counts -and all strategic priorities -.

We need to ensure sustainability of our programs through capacity building throughout our schools. We must make sure there is enough training throughout the District and we need to fully utilize the "Train the Trainer" model. The trainer could be a principal or a teacher who becomes the "go to" person who trains the other teachers and the parents (in their area of expertise). This would result in a huge savings across the District because hiring consultants costs anything from \$2,000 to \$10,000 per day.

I'm definitely not against the parcel tax, but I'm wondering if all people without children will always want to pass the parcel tax. I would like to let the voters know that we have other innovative, proactive and dedicated approaches to deal with our fiscal challenges and preserve programs for our students.

Transfer Students

My concern about accepting transfers is they will impact our small class sizes. I think we should be as tough as possible on the criteria for accepting a transfer student. We need to let Lafayette students thrive and the decision (to admit transfer students)

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