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## Bond Feasibility Study Results Presented

*By Cathy Tyson*

Lafayette School Board members got a resounding "yes" when consultants at a Jan. 13 meeting held at Stanley Middle School presented the results of a bond feasibility survey to see if there was potential voter support to maintain the quality of education in local public schools.

A telephone survey reached out to 400 random Lafayette households of residents who would likely vote in either the June or November elections. The very first question asked by consultant True North Research determined how the issues stacked up in voters' minds, with 90 percent of respondents agreeing that maintaining the quality of education in local public schools was either extremely important or very important.

The Lafayette School District has a two-fold problem: The average age of schools is 62 years old, with associated serious infrastructure issues related to buildings that age - plumbing, roofs, electrical - and there is a need to accommodate a growing number of students.

With no matching money available from the state due to significant budget cutbacks that started in 2008, the Lafayette School District is grappling with "a place where time has stood still," said architect and consultant Dara Youngdale when presenting facilities assessment findings in October. Tim McLarney of True North Research explained at the Jan. 13 school board meeting that there was "robust support" for a \$64 million general obligation bond measure with independent citizen oversight that would provide modern, safe classrooms and facilities at elementary and middle schools, and no money for administrative salaries.

Potential voters were also asked about their comfort level with a tax threshold of amounts ranging from \$30 to \$21 dollars per \$100,000 of assessed value that would cost the average homeowner in Lafayette \$194 per year. At each of four price levels support remained similar, ranging from 63 to 66 percent of likely voters who would vote definitely yes or probably yes.

When respondents were asked how they would choose to spend the bond proceeds, almost three-quarters said they preferred to renovate and upgrade existing schools. Only 15 percent were in favor of reoccupying and renovating the White Pony School that is currently being used by The Meher Schools.

While the consultant's survey demonstrated voters' understanding that maintaining the quality of education is the most important issue facing the community, it will be up to the school board to decide if and when to place a bond measure on the ballot.

The November 2016 ballot will likely be long and may have other tax measures from the Contra Costa Transit Authority and the City of Lafayette for a bump in the rate of sales tax. This can "definitely create a headwind," said District Superintendent Rachel Zinn.

Further public discussions are slated to address Bond Capacity and how to balance multiple objectives: assessment of facility needs and wants, assessment of voter support, and development of a prudent financing plan.

"We're encouraged by the very positive survey results," said Zinn, but she cautioned that even with voter support of a \$64-\$70 million bond measure, all the district facilities were evaluated in 2015 and \$130 million worth of repairs and renovations were needed for the district's four elementary schools and one middle school. With California ranking 46 out of 50 in per-student state spending, according to Ed Source on Jan. 7, 2015, the \$64 million question becomes whether voters will be willing to tax themselves, and if so, what the priorities will be to keep students, safe, dry and warm, while accommodating an increasing number of pupils.

**Will City Ask for Increased Sales Tax?**

The Sales Tax Subcommittee presented its findings, which determined the amount of available funds as compared to the estimated cost for a variety of potential projects, to the Lafayette City Council at its Jan. 11 meeting. Recent Community Conversations gathered information on a variety of city priorities and residents' willingness to pay for those items - preserving open space and crime

surveillance topped both of those lists.

At issue is a new additional sales tax that could generate revenue for the next 10 years: a one-cent tax level would generate \$30 million, and a half-cent would garner \$15 million. City council members unanimously agreed to have the Sales Tax Subcommittee investigate further. Council Member Traci Reilly suggested narrowing down the focus of priorities in order to set realistic expectations. Everyone agreed with Mayor Mark Mitchell who was "willing to go to the next step" to clearly define parameters. The issue will be heard again at the Feb. 22 council meeting. - C. Tyson.

Reach the reporter at: [cathy@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:cathy@lamorindaweekly.com)

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