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LAFSD parcel tax discussion leads only to more questions

By Nick Marnell

A Feb. 12 discussion by school board members on the feasibility of a parcel tax to help fund operations of the Lafayette School District led to questions about not only the amount of the proposed tax but whether to even place a parcel tax on the ballot in 2018.

Financial projections presented by Chief Business Official Diane Deshler showed that, thanks to a proposed funding boost from Gov. Jerry Brown, LAFSD will eliminate deficit spending in 2018-19, but without a parcel tax the district would fall back in the hole from the next year forward. Should the district decide to place a parcel tax on the ballot, consultant Bonnie Moss recommended that the district keep the proposed tax under \$150, have it run from five to eight years and include a full senior exemption.

Not satisfied with the financial projections because they failed to include any salary increases for teachers, who have received no raises since 2016, board member David Gerson pushed for a \$199 parcel tax. "We need to maintain our edge with teachers," he said, noting the expense of salary competition due to teacher shortages. Gerson said that his \$199 recommendation would also be insurance against the full senior exemption.

Newly appointed board member Rob Sturm suggested pushing the parcel tax measure into 2019. He cited the uncertainties of the new federal tax law, the election of a new governor, appointment of a new school district superintendent and the bungled administration of the Measure B parcel tax as reasons for a delay. "We only have one shot with the voters," Sturm said. "Maybe a third option is to wait."

Others noted that a recession looms ahead, possibly as soon as 2019. Could a recession be the right time to ask for a parcel tax, because then the district would have a more compelling story to tell? asked Clerk of the Board Suzy Pak.

"After all of the cuts we've made, is this the best for our students?" countered Meredith Meade, the only board member whose term does not expire this year. "Having no parcel tax scares me," she said.

"We're all going around in circles," said board President Teresa Gerringer, who advocated for the \$148 parcel tax over both \$199 and waiting until next year, based upon testing results of what dollar figure two-thirds of voters would likely approve. "I respect the concept of trying to squeeze a little more out, but we think it's prudent to stay at \$148," Gerringer said. A \$148 tax on 8,320 Lafayette parcels would produce \$1.23 million in revenue for the district.

Polling results gave no assurance that the tax measure will score an easy victory at any dollar level, and that fact, combined with the mixed feelings of the board members over not only the amount of tax but whether to proceed at all, left an air of uncertainty as the board prepares for its next parcel tax discussion, agendized for the Feb. 21 district meeting at Stanley Middle School.

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