



Published October 3rd, 2018

State Assembly candidates Baker and Bauer-Kahan woo Lamorinda voters

By Nick Marnell



Catharine Baker Photos provided



Rebecca Bauer-Kahan

Incumbent Catharine Baker, R-Dublin, and challenger Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, D-Orinda, are running for State Assembly in the 16th District, and the candidates discussed what they plan to do in Sacramento for the Lamorinda area.

On the fact that the Orinda Union, Lafayette, and Moraga school districts are among the lowest funded of all school districts in California through the Local Control Funding Formula:

Baker said she will fight for reforms of LCFF, a program that she said was clearly flawed. She agreed that school districts in her assembly district are underfunded. "The base grant is inadequate," Baker said. "That is why I co-authored a bipartisan measure to increase LCFF funding levels significantly in the coming years and inject all of that increase into the base grant, which ... helps all

schools and students in Lamorinda." She also called for transparency and accountability over the expenditures made by school districts. "So we can better ensure the dollars are going where they should - to the classroom and student success and not just administrative expenses," Baker said.

"I agree with the premise of the LCFF - it promotes local control of spending and prioritizes school districts that need more resources, but our legislators in Sacramento need to be prioritizing funding for our schools and doing everything they can to increase the base grant," said Bauer-Kahan, who called it a travesty that California is near the bottom in school funding out of the 50 states. "In Lamorinda, parent-run foundations work tirelessly to raise the millions in additional funding needed each year to fill in gaps in local school district budgets. We need to prioritize our children, our schools, and our future, and that's what I would do in Sacramento."

On increasing state special education funding:

Bauer-Kahan said she would explore ways to factor the Individualized Education Program - developed for kids who need specialized services - into the LCFF formula so that schools have more funding for special education. "In the Assembly, I will devote significant time to careful scrutiny of this important budget issue, to help craft budget solutions that will contribute more money towards education funding," she said.

"I was proud to support Assembly Bill 2168," said Baker about a bipartisan bill that provides significant, sustained state funding for students with disabilities and special education needs. "This bill would also create a funding mechanism for state support of special education preschool." The incumbent said she also supported bills that provide special education teacher mentoring and co-authored a bill that calls on Congress to meet its promise to fund special education.

On increasing teacher salaries and providing them affordable housing:

"The consistent theme among teachers is the extremely high cost of living. Housing is one significant driver of that high cost," Baker said, noting that she has supported, and continues to support, various housing bills including Senate Bill 1413, which authorizes school districts to establish programs to assist teachers and school district employees with their housing needs. The bill also dedicates district-owned land to affordable rental housing and restricts occupancy to teachers and school district employees.

"This issue strikes particularly close to home, as we lost a significant number of teachers at an elementary school in Orinda last year because they could not afford to live near Orinda, and the commute to work was too burdensome. This is simply unacceptable," Bauer-Kahan said. She would work with local governments to find middle-class affordable housing options for teachers and other critical public servants, such as firefighters and police officers, to live close to the communities they serve.

On being a strong advocate for local government in Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda:

Both candidates said that Sacramento has overreached when it comes to mandating local government actions, and the candidates primarily focused on AB 2923, the bill that Gov. Jerry Brown signed Sept. 30 which gives BART exclusive housing authority on land it owns within a half mile of a BART station, including land in Lafayette.

"We cannot take local control away from the cities and counties that know best how to tackle our housing crisis while not overburdening our schools, emergency services, roads and other infrastructure. Unfortunately, we did not have a representative at the table that could make sure this bill would take into account the needs and infrastructure of our cities," Bauer-Kahan said.

While she agrees that safe, affordable housing is an important issue, Bauer-Kahan said she will fight for local control. "We need to make sure this housing is strengthening the fabric of our community by providing a place to live for those that need it most. But it must fit the character and existing infrastructure of the community," Bauer-Kahan said.

"I lead the fight against this bill, because it put housing decisions - which should be left to local cities and counties who have the planning experience, expertise, and local accountability - with a transit agency that has zero experience planning housing and that already faces significant challenges meeting its primary goal: to deliver safe, reliable, and clean transit service," Baker said. "BART is struggling and needs our help to fulfill its duties as a transit agency, and now is not the time to make BART responsible for housing."

Baker called SB 35 another example of overreach of local control. The bill essentially provides that if developers meet certain high-density and low-income housing requirements, their development proposals must be approved regardless of local input.

Other issues they promise to take on in Sacramento:

"I support bipartisan, comprehensive pension reform that will help school districts with the growing impact of unfunded pension costs while protecting the pensions our teachers have earned," Baker said. She named transportation a serious concern, and introduced a bill that provides testing of autonomous shuttles to BART stations. As a proponent for the local environment, Baker said she has led the effort to increase funding for the East Bay Regional Parks District.

Bauer-Kahan said she will work to promote gun safety. "I applaud Orinda following Moraga's lead and taking careful efforts to promote gun safety on a local level," she said, referring to what she called the city council's investigation of ways to strengthen gun control within Orinda city limits and possibly regulate the sale of firearms. The challenger also said she is a firm advocate for women's right to choose. "I am proud to be the only Planned Parenthood-endorsed candidate in this race and this issue affects all women, including the women in Lamorinda," Bauer-Kahan said.

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