



Published June 10th, 2020

## Orinda school board tries to budget in time of uncertainty

By Sora O'Doherty

The Orinda Union School Board received a preliminary draft budget from Theresa Sidrian, Director of Business Services, that projects deficit spending in the next two years. However, in the face of unprecedented uncertainty about what school will be like in the next academic year, the board unanimously decided to delay the budget process in the hopes of having more information available. Therefore, it scheduled a special meeting for June 22, in addition to its June 8 meeting. Each school is required to submit its budget by the end of June, and Sidrian said that there would be sufficient time after the June 22 meeting to meet the requirement.

One thing that the board was able to do was to adopt the school calendar for the 2020-21 academic year, which will start Aug. 13, the day after Acalanes and finish May 28, 2021, the day after Acalanes. As a cost-cutting measure, the board is considering replacing two teacher development days with furlough days. In addition, Feb. 18 2021 has been designated as a "potential weather day," which could be used to make up a day that school was canceled owing to an adverse weather event, or which could be used as a vacation day, if not required for make up. Beyond that, nothing is clear about how school will be conducted next year. The OUSD, like all school districts in California, is facing significant budget cuts owing to the economic downturn caused by COVID-19. The governor's budget, introduced in May, includes large cuts in school appropriations. The budget will be final at the beginning of July, but there may be further cuts to come in future revisions. The cuts come despite the fact that the governor has prioritized school funding and hopes to shelter schools from the worst economic effects of COVID-19. Other unanswered questions include what school enrollment will look like for the fall and the outcome of collective bargaining.

Basically, the district is looking at an over \$2 million loss in revenue that will result in dramatically lower reserves for this budget and deficits for the next two years. Sidrian reported that this is the first time in her memory that the district would fail to have a positive balance for the two upcoming years. Board President Cara Hoxie pointed out that this budget is based on income from last year, but that income for this year may significantly lower, causing an even greater problem for next year's budget.

The board considered how to deal with the lower revenue and potentially increased expenses. One thing that could reduce expenses would be to continue with distance learning, even if school were allowed to resume. However, the board rejected this option. Board member Hilary Weiner said, "If it is safe for kids to be in school, then they should be in school." Although Hoxie wondered when students will feel truly safe in school.

The board did adopt an increased statutory school fee for all new developments, whether residential or commercial. Another option to bring in more revenue, espoused by Charles Shannon, president of the Orinda Educators Organization, is to ask the community and parents groups for a large, one-time donation. (See story, Page A6). The board also heard from its budget reduction subcommittee, Carol Brown and Jason Kaune. Brown talked about the unintended consequences of some previous attempts to reduce expenditures, and warned the board to look out for such possibilities. For example, combining human resources with student services led to increased legal costs.

Among the items considered for cost cutting are classroom staffing, distance learning, and special education. Class size increases from 20 to 24 students at the elementary level and up to 30 students per class in intermediate school could result in savings of up to \$990,000. Instructional aides cost \$800,000, which has been paid for by parent's clubs.

In the event that distance learning continues, there are possible savings of up to \$370,000 for music instruction, \$196,000 for librarians and library techs, and additional savings for physical education and maintenance/safety expenses, including reduced utility use. Special education aides could be a potential cost savings of \$38,000, but Brown warned that this could backfire if they have to hire contract aides as a replacement, which could cost more.

Also under consideration are pay cuts for administrative and staff and a possible "step and column" freeze for teachers, which would have to be negotiated and could have negative unintended consequences. Brown said that she hopes the board can find transformational ways to permanently reduce costs, to avoid having a cycle of cuts and increases. Hoxie said she doesn't like all or nothing thinking and suggested partial reductions. Board member Liz Daoust said that, as a parent, she would favor larger class sizes over loss of enrichment programs. The committee also presented the views of the individual schools on a number of possible reductions.

In a related matter, it was reported that the district issued \$20 million in bonds with interest at an historically low rate: 2.48% over 30 years. Sidrian reported that the bonds were met with enthusiasm, which she attributed to the district's AA+ rating, the highest possible.

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

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA