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# 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 subcom-

mittee, 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.

# A creek runs through it: Orinda seeks kids' input on the future of downtown

By Sora O'Doherty

The city of Orinda is looking to hear from Orinda children for its downtown plan. The planning department put together a brief video to provide local kids with background information as well as a survey just for kids. If you have school-aged children in Orinda, the planning department would love to hear from them!

The video asks children about some things they may not be aware of, such as that San Pablo Creek actually runs through downtown Orinda, and that the planning department is making a 3D model of the downtown.

Senior Planner Adam Foster presented the video to Cathy Campbell's third-grade class at Wagner Ranch Elementary School. Foster found the children to be very enthusiastic about the project. They suggested a singing fountain for downtown.

The survey has nine questions for children, including, What do you think downtowns are used for? What is your favorite thing to do in downtown Orinda? Of all the downtowns you have been to, which did you like the most? Why? And, Does anyone live in downtown Orinda? The survey also has room for suggestions.

The responses so far are from a variety of kids, from first through 12th grades. The answers are thoughtful, and the children seem well traveled, liking nearby downtowns, such as Danville, to New York City across the country. A number of cities in Oregon were named as fa-

vorites, including Bend and Ashland. Walnut Creek got some positive comments, but also some negative ones. Santa Cruz and neighboring Lafayette also received positive comments.

Children like to visit the library, with Orinda's library getting praise, to visit the toy store and eat out. Loard's Ice Cream, Starbucks and Nation's Giant Hamburgers got shoutouts, as did the local hardware store. Respondents wished for more parks, more restaurants, and more shops, including a book store. One respondent, who noted that their parents were divorced and had to sell the family home, wished there were smaller homes or apartments available in Orinda. Another also wished for more affordable housing.

An eighth-grader suggested, "Please make Orinda exciting!! It's always so dead, so please build more affordable housing, add retail and maybe consider raising the height limit on buildings." A second-grader suggested murals for downtown. A sixth-grader said, "Grass Valley has my favorite downtown. This is because the city has preserved its history very well, but it is still a very interesting place to hang out. Plus there always seems to be something exiting going on, like a parade, street market, or festival." A fifth-grader answered the question, "What do you think downtown Orinda will look like in 100 years?" with the pithy observation, "I will be dead."

The kids survey is in addition to the survey for adults, which is still available. Over 600 people have already completed the survey. The plan-

ning department has also released a tentative schedule of upcoming meetings on downtown development. The city council's downtown subcommittee will meet at 5 p.m. June 10 via Zoom Webinar and again on July 7. On June 23 there is a second community

workshop on the downtown precise plan. The workshop, tentatively scheduled for 7 p.m., will also be via Zoom Webinar.

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