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New Moraga school bond? Superintendent Parks reviews what last bond accomplished

By Sora O'Doherty

As the Moraga School District (MSD) moves toward the possibility of placing another school bond on the ballot, Superintendent Julie Parks wants residents to know what was accomplished with the last school bond, known as Measure V. Passed in 2016, Measure V provided \$33 million for school facilities. MSD's schools were built in the '50s and '60s and were badly in need of renovation. According to Parks, although the district is required to allocate a percentage of its budget to facilities, that barely covers staff and a bare minimum of deferred maintenance.

Parks joked that essential maintenance, like replacing roofs, isn't showy, like getting a new kitchen in your home, but, she added, every homeowner knows the misery of a leaky roof. Replacing some essential roofs meant that MSD got through last year's heavy rains without having leaks in the classrooms.

Before the COVID pandemic, MSD replaced most of the HVAC systems in schools, with the exception of Los Perales' multi-purpose room. MSD's modern HVAC facilities in all school properties allows for remote control to close dampers to keep out smoke that drifts into Moraga from distant fires.

Parks says that the district has many high priority items on which they are making progress. Many improvements involve safety. A report on the overall safety of Moraga campuses recommended increased visibility of campus entry points from the school offices, and the renovation of Donald Rheem Elementary School accomplished that goal for Rheem. Earthquake retrofitting is also a priority.

Moraga's only playing fields and gymnasiums are at the schools, and Measure V allowed MSD to update and replace floors, bathrooms and locker rooms. The district would like to install sustainable fields, playgrounds and physical education facilities for community use.

With the introduction of universal school meals in California in school year 2022-23, kitchen facilities became one of Parks' high priorities. MSD does not have any full kitchens at the schools, although they do have increased capacity to bake and prepare food. However, MSD does not have a commercial kitchen, like the one that was recently added to Sleepy Hollow Elementary School in Orinda.

MSD is also concerned about preventing overcrowding, in the face of lower age limits on school attendance. By the 2026 school year, all 4-year-olds will be eligible for transitional kindergarten, or TK. TK was introduced back in the 1990s to provide for a small group of children whose birthdays fell between Sept. 2 and Dec. 2, which prevented them from starting school when the requirement that children be 5 years old by Sept. 1 was introduced. However, two years ago legislation pushed access to TK for all 4-year-olds.

Parks explained that this presents a specific challenge, because there are requirements for TK classrooms that differ from other classrooms. TK classrooms must meet size requirements and must have attached bathrooms. MSD needs additional classrooms to provide for TK students, who generally attend classes from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., staggered between earlybirds and latebirds.

Parks is proud of the child care program available at MSD schools, and notes that it is available at the very affordable cost of \$7 per hour. Although MSD had the foresight to apply for state funding in 2022, they were not selected. However, Parks hopes that they might still receive state funding in the future, adding that they did receive state matching funds of up to \$9 million. She explained that this is one of the reasons that bond measures are so important because to qualify for matching funding, you have to be able to show that you can actually match the funding provided by the state.

A new bond measure would allow MSD to fund deferred maintenance to protect the improvements that were funded by Measure V. The board is considering placing a new \$52 million bond measure on the March 2024 ballot.

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[back](#)

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