

HBCSD calls for support of upcoming bond measure, despite opponents' concerns about 2002 bond spending

- by Alana Garrigues
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The impact of having 300 students above the maximum enrollment capacity in two schools presents grave concerns for those associated with the Hermosa Beach City School District.

Third-graders study in a classroom without windows, hidden behind a stage. Children sometimes go without lunch because getting through the line takes longer than the lunch period, according to one parent. Teachers skip restroom breaks for the same reason. Performers and speakers avoid conducting assemblies outdoors. And Million-dollar home owners send their children to school in portable trailers and multi-purpose rooms with partitions.

The state of the district's facilities and the quality of academics in Hermosa Beach do not match up, in the eyes of many Hermosa Beach residents and school employees. The only way they see to move forward is to invest in the district with Measure Q, a \$54 million bond on the November ballot that would rebuild and renovate an aging district, based on two years of long-term facilities planning with gkkworks architects and a citizen's committee. However, there are still opponents who don't trust that the district will spend the money wisely, based on a previous bond measure. But school officials argue this time will be different.

"The process has been a long yet productive one that has been well documented, public and inclusive," said Hermosa Beach City School District Superintendent Pat Escalante.

She said that options to acquire or rent other properties were considered but not found feasible, and demographic software was used to project future enrollment.

"For two years the district has examined how to ensure that there is classroom space available for all children that live in the city," Escalante said. "Enrollment has increased each year since the early '90s and View and Valley schools are extremely overcrowded. This year the trend continues and over 50 new students are enrolled in Hermosa schools."

Therefore, the school district put Measure Q, which will meet the district's long-term facilities planning needs, on the Nov. 4 ballot. The money would be spent to renovate or rebuild North School, and to update View and Valley schools, including upgrades for security and utilities. The

bond would cost homeowners \$30 in tax levies per \$100,000 in property value for no more than 25 years. The money would be used to fund the long-term facilities plan the district adopted at the June school board meeting, but specific numbers are not mentioned. The bond measure is designed to allow flexibility in the number of classrooms or modernization projects.

The measure reads that facilities “need to be renovated, modernized, repaired, improved, constructed and equipped to enable the district to improve the health and safety and the quality of education.”

It goes on to state that due to overcrowding, “it is in the best interest of students to reopen the North School and modernize, construct and improve the facilities needed for that school.”

It is met with opposition by a contingent of residents who claim the district mismanaged funds from a 2002 bond measure, leading to the controversial Valley gym construction. The gymnasium was placed low on a list of 20-plus school improvements in the verbiage on the bond measure, and several residents said they approved the bond because it was “sold” as a classroom bond. However, the gym was built, along with two classrooms, and the money ran out.

“Measure J had the standard stated school improvements listed on the bond, and an extensive to-do list written into the voter pamphlet,” said concerned citizen Miyo Prassas. “Yet here we are, eight years later, with two schools that are extremely impacted, and angry electorate and panicked parents.”

Superintendent Pat Escalante said more classrooms could have been built, if it hadn’t been for the cost of litigation surrounding the measure. However, she was also quick to point out that the gym happened under a different board, a different administration and under different circumstances than this bond.

She added that with City Council support and a citizen’s oversight committee, this bond would have additional checks and balances.

Monique Ehsan, the former chair of the disbanded Facilities Planning Advisory Committee who stated that students will sometimes skip lunch because of the wait, said there is one silver lining in the gym incident. A middle school is required to have a gym, so if voters approve the bond and North School undergoes a rebuild or renovation, and if North and View became elementary schools and Valley were converted to a middle school, the facility would be adequate. (Incorrect Statement)

Ehsan understands the concerns of residents who oppose the bond measure. She admits she would have liked more community dialogue, input and a broader scope as an FPAC member to evaluate all of the district’s options, including an in-depth evaluation of a property purchase or lease, if for no other reason than to make the case that due diligence was met in recommending the most expensive option.

However, that doesn’t change her bottom line—North School is the best option, and the children deserve better facilities, she said.

“The long-range master facilities plan is not just about North School—it’s a 20-year plan for the school district,” Ehsan said. “The bond would give our schools everything they need to make our campuses secure, to bring them into the 21st century, make them safe, get the space we need.”

A licensed Realtor, Ehsan said that even residents without children or grandchildren in the district would be wise to invest in the schools.

“People want to buy homes in Hermosa Beach because of the schools,” Ehsan said. “Healthy schools make healthy communities (and) make healthy property values.”

She hopes that in the two remaining months before the election, community outreach expands and parents get the word out to neighbors about the dire need for funds.

Despite the criticism of the bond, opponents aren’t against improving schools or increasing the value of properties. They are concerned that the bill is too high and the verbiage is too lax.

“The actual cost of (the bond) will more than double after interest is added,” said Prassas. “In fact, the district is actually asking for a \$120 million tax on Hermosa homeowners without a professional planning process, balanced investigation of less expensive options, no specific, publicly supported plan, and no experience to handle the many hurdles that lie ahead. According to many facility planning books and articles, that is a recipe for disaster.”

However, Escalante said that protections are built into the measure, including a citizen’s oversight committee to track how the money is spent. She also said the long-term facilities plan, which involved more than 40 meetings with teachers, the school board, FPAC and the public, is the basis for the request.

Resident Linda Igo, who like Prassas is concerned about the district’s history with bond money, said if the district wants the measure to pass, officials should be more specific about their needs.

“Unless this measure is extremely specific in its language and makes a very short list of proposed projects, it will fail,” said Igo. “If the measure’s writers want a new school, they should be clear (and state) that is all this measure will cover. It’s a matter of the public’s trust of the school board’s intentions and the wisdom of their decisions, which went by the wayside years ago.”

Then there are the concerns raised at community meetings with the architects that the district will once again shrink, and render the extra investment in facilities futile. Long-term facilities plans project a 20-year trend of rising or consistent enrollment numbers, (No longer correct as of November 2016, after bond was passed) and the California legislature is considering mandatory transitional kindergarten for 4-year-olds, which would also increase HBCSD enrollment.

In the meantime, teachers and students are putting up with less, unnecessarily, according to View second-grade teacher Tracy Robinson, who is an advocate of the bond. Robinson has worked as a teacher in the district for 24 years, and has seen it transform from a one-school district into two campuses. She is responsible for scheduling the outdoor assemblies at View, due to a lack of indoor meeting space for students.

The district has made do with a stream of Band-Aid solutions such as staggered lunches, portables and repurposed classrooms, but it is not an optimal learning environment and it wouldn't be feasible in the long-term, she said.

"It's a no-brainer in that we need to open a school. We are just way too crowded," Robinson said. "The children are our future. We must invest in them."

The full text of the bond measure is available on the city's website at hermosabch.org, via the July 23 school boarding meeting agenda.

http://tbrnews.com/news/hermosa_beach/hbcds-calls-for-support-of-upcoming-bond-measure-despite-opponents/article_10e9af7e-354e-11e4-a4c4-001a4bcf887a.html