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Lamorinda Schools Face Significant Funding Reductions

Districts Plan for Personnel and Program Cuts

By Andrea A. Firth

It was a beautiful seventy-degree day without a cloud was in the sky as the superintendents and finance directors from each of Lamorinda's four school districts headed north to Sacramento last week to receive an update on the Governor's proposed budget. However, the atmosphere inside the budget workshop, which was packed with school administrators from across the State, was anything but sunny. "Gloom," stated Orinda Union School District (OUSD) Superintendent Dr. Joe Jaconette as he described the mood in the room to the OUSD Board of Trustees later that same day. "There was not anything good described there at all," he added.

Last year at this time, Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) Superintendent Jim Negri described the Governor's proposal to cut \$4 billion from the State's school funds the most devastating budget proposal since Proposition 13 passed. But like a recurring nightmare that has gotten a whole lot scarier, Lamorinda school administrators are again faced with receiving dramatically reduced State revenue limit funding that is significantly worse in magnitude. The proposed budget means a 16% reduction in revenue limit funds, so schools in California are faced with educating with 84 cents on the dollar, according to Negri

And things may get worse before they get better. "You can't bank on this budget proposal being the worst case scenario," Jaconette told his Board. "Things may get worse by the May revise, and we definitely won't get a windfall from the State," he added.

Many school leaders are skeptical of some of the revenue enhancements included in the Governor's proposal such as the securitization of the State lottery, which represents \$5 billion of the plan, and the State's ability to secure loans, another \$6 billion piece of the proposal.

The Governor's idea to allow schools to cut the school year down to 175 days from 180 days has raised more than eyebrows in the Lamorinda school community. Longtime OUSD Board of Trustees member Pat Rudebusch seemed incredulous of the option. "The United States already has one of the shortest school years as compared to other developed nations," she stated. "We are looking at some potentially drastic changes to how we educate our youth, and it's not for the better." Negri of AUHSD questioned the legality of the option as presented by the Governor. In addition, administrators acknowledged that the reduced work schedule, and consequently reduced pay, for both teachers and classified employees would have to be negotiated through their bargaining units.

According to Negri, AUHSD will weather the proposed midyear cuts due to \$2 million in undesignated funds that the District was able to save through a spending and hiring freeze. However, the financial picture for the 2009-2010 school year looks much less balanced with the District projecting a \$5.2 million deficit. The AUHSD Board has begun to hold budget study sessions to identify potential cuts including the elimination of class size reduction and reducing counseling, library, and healthcare services. The possibility of taking an increased parcel tax measure to the voters is also on the table.

In the Lafayette School District, Superintendent Dr. Fred Brill said the district is expecting a \$940,000 mid-year budget cut. "We believe we have the capacity to handle that," said Brill. This will, however, result in a \$220,000 structural deficit for

the district. "We will be spending more dollars than we're bringing in and can't sustain that," said Brill. The district expects the deficit will rise to around \$600,000. "We are in some uncharted territories," he added.

"All the low hanging fruit is gone. Now we're looking at people," stated Moraga School District Superintendent Rick Schafer, who estimates that his district is facing a million dollar plus shortfall through the end of this school year and the next. Having already moved to freeze all spending except that which is "mission critical," he has also developed a cut list that includes elimination of personnel and programs.

OUSD also expects to be short a million dollars in operating funds secondary to the State financial crisis. The OUSD Board has begun to examine the budget and to review a list of potential budget reductions, which includes possible cuts to class size reduction, art and music instruction, and math and literary specialists.

All of the school districts expect to lean heavily on the monies raised by their educational foundations, parent clubs and PTAs to help them manage through the budget morass. "One of our great challenges in talking about programs and reducing or eliminating them to achieve savings relates to the fact that the parents clubs and the Educational Foundation underwrite many of them," states OUSD Board President Riki Sorenson. "So any action would require agreement with those stakeholders and deferral of money back to the school district to keep other programs alive."

As mandated by the State, schools must announce lay-off notices by March 13th.

Jean Follmer contributed to this article.

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