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Supporters Push for Passage of Measure G

By Jennifer Wake

In the coming weeks, parents from the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) will be spreading the word to get out the vote on Nov. 3 for passage of Measure G - a new parcel tax measure designed to extend the existing AUHSD parcel tax indefinitely. "Measure G will provide stable, local funding," says Tom Mulvaney, AUHSD Board Member and Measure G Chair. "This parcel tax is a renewal, a continuation of Measure A - a \$189 a year tax that equates to about \$3.64 a week." Measure A was approved by voters in 2005 to restore small class sizes in English and algebra, and to restore competitive classroom programs. It brings in approximately \$6.7 million dollars annually to the District, but is scheduled to expire on June 30, 2011. As stated in the Measure G ballot measure, proceeds of the parcel tax will be used "to provide stable local funding at [District] high schools and protect core academic programs from deep State budget cuts; preserve science, mathematics, arts, music and foreign language courses; and maintain library hours." Since the parcel tax amount stays at the existing rate, and continues its senior citizen's exemption, proponents of the Measure say there is no tax increase. But Measure G is unique because it contains no sunset period (expiration date) - a provision that has some local residents calling foul. Orinda resident Richard Colman says now is not the time to seek a "permanent tax" when Lamorindans have been besieged with other tax and fee increases, the California unemployment rate is at an all-time high, and the economy might improve (see Letters to the Editor, Sept. 16, 2009). "We are in a tough economic time," says Mulvaney, but given that the District doesn't expect to receive funding from any other source outside of the State, he says it's prudent to have a tax that the District can rely on. According to AUHSD Superintendent John Stockton, there is no cogent state-wide conversation taking place regarding the funding of public schools, and funding from the State over the last decade has primarily been devoted to low performing schools. "The high performance of the Acalanes Union High School District is due in large measure to the funding provided by the parcel tax," he says. "Over the last five years the District has only been able to offer its high quality programs through the support of the parcel tax and additional donations from the community." Additionally, Stockton underscores that the District has had a parcel tax for approximately 20 years. Returning to a constituency that is largely in favor of a parcel tax every four to five years is costly, and labor-intensive. "The human and fiscal expense of election cycles, along with the inability to make long term plans, is a serious handicap to a school district," he says. "While money is not the only factor in the success of a district, it is the key to programmatic success." Even with the parcel tax, Stockton says the AUHSD's budget has been reduced by over \$6 million during the last two years. State funding for AUHSD this year went from \$56 million to \$49 million, forcing the District to lay off 19 teachers, 17 staff members and delete 95 sections to make up for the shortfall. "We've made many, many cuts and it's been difficult," Mulvaney says. "The Acalanes Union High School District is the number-one-rated high school district in the state academically. If we want the districts to maintain high quality education in the state of California, we're going to have to pay for it. What young people get is top-flight public education." If the Measure fails, however, the District will be in a tight spot. AUHSD Associate Superintendent for Business Services Christopher Learned says losing nearly \$7 million in funding would be catastrophic. "Without the parcel tax, over 70 full-time teachers would be eliminated," adds Stockton. "Las Lomas High School, the largest school in the district, currently has 75 full-time positions. A dynamic educational program is not a realistic expectation should one-quarter of the AUHSD teaching staff be released." Education Foundation of Orinda (EFO) president Joan Kiekhaefer says there is no way that EFO can come close to bridging the gap at Miramonte if the Measure fails. "Nearly one third of the EFO contribution to Miramonte already goes back to the District to fund salaries for counselors, librarians and leadership teachers which would have been cut this year because of the state budget shortfalls leaving less funds for Miramonte-specific programs." For Mulvaney, the passage of Measure G is a way for the District to avoid descending into a world of mediocrity given the current state of California. "I believe I can have an impact in my small way at the Acalanes Union High School District and hopefully try to maintain some quality there," he says. "I believe Measure G is going to pass because these communities believe in public education. But it's a fight. It's going to be a fight."

Reach the reporter at: jennifer@lamorindaweekly.com

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