

Queuing up - Measure Q

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In 1977, USC Rossier School of Education Dean Dr. John Stallings presented an enrollment forecast to the Hermosa Beach City School District board at Prospect Heights School. Enrollment at the district's six schools had fallen more than 50 percent over the preceding 14 years, from a high of 2,141 students in 1963 to just over 800.

Prospect Heights had barely 100 students. Pier Avenue Junior High, the 1920s-era, art deco school district showcase in the heart of town, had closed two years earlier.

"We have twice as many eighth-graders as we do kindergartners," Hermosa Superintendent Andrew Joyce told the Prospect parents.

Still, the parents were furious over the school board's decision to close the school at the end of the school year.

Stallings sympathized.

"A school is an idea, with tomorrow inside. ... It is love – with a lump in your throat," Stallings wrote in one of his many published papers.

But he stood by his findings that the district no longer needed, nor could it afford, six schools.

After the meeting, newly elected City Councilman George Schmeltzer asked Stallings what the city could do to increase enrollment.

"He told me, 'Ban the pill,'" Schmeltzer recalled recently.

Though he retired from the City Council in 1984, Schmeltzer has remained active in Hermosa politics. He is a signer to the Argument in Favor of Measure Q on the Tuesday's ballot. Measure Q asks residents to approve a \$54 million bond to alleviate classroom overcrowding.

Hermosa has 1,429 students at its two schools, Valley and View. More than one-third of the students, 504, are in temporary classrooms such as portable trailers, teachers lounges, the administration office and on a theater stage.

The problem is not unique to Hermosa Beach. Measure Q is one of 125 local K-12 school bond and parcel taxes measures on ballots throughout California.

Class sizes in the state are 50 percent larger than the national average. Since the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, one year after Stallings presented his report, California has sunk to 49th in the nation in per-pupil funding.

Times change

Stallings' 1977 report predicted that Hermosa enrollment would continue to decline because Hermosa property values would continue to rise, pricing out families with young children.

Neighboring Manhattan Beach and Redondo Beach also lost enrollment during this period. At the end of the 1977-78 school year, Manhattan Beach Unified closed Manhattan Heights School and Redondo Beach Unified closed Edison School.

The future proved Stallings right about escalating Hermosa property values. And he was right about falling enrollment, at least through the following decade. During the 1986-87 school year, Hermosa had barely 600 students at its three remaining schools – Valley, View and North.

The following year, the school board closed View and North. All of the districts' students, from kindergarten to eighth grade, were moved to the newly remodeled Valley Vista Elementary School.

Pier Avenue Junior High was sold to the city for use as a community center in 1978.

Strips of Prospect Heights, View and South were sold in 1984 for residential development. But the vast majority of the surplus school properties were sold to the city for use as parks. South School became South Park. Prospect Heights became Edith Rodaway Friendship Park. North's playground became the soccer field at Valley Park. A school storage facility became Fort Lots-o-Fun Park.

The district used proceeds from the sales and leases to remodel Valley Vista into a state-of-the art campus.

The decade of transition was marred by bitter fights. The school board wanted residential prices for its schools. The City Council wanted to pay open-space prices. Some residents thought the city shouldn't pay anything for the schools. Councilman Jack Wood unsuccessfully sued the city for making Pier Avenue School a community center, rather than selling it for retail development.

Parents whose schools were closed tried unsuccessfully to recall the school board.

Carol Reznichuk, one of the targeted school board members, describes the campaign as nastier than anything she saw at the national political level while working in Washington, D.C., for Robert Kennedy.

"I was pregnant with my third child and parents would scream at me in the market. One day I was talking to Rev. Parker about it. He counseled me that people are afraid of change, especially when it affects their children. He said, 'Look at it positively. People are passionate because they care.'"

Fueling parent discontent was an unforeseen demographic trend. The year Valley School reopened as a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school, enrollment began to climb. It's been climbing ever since.

Today, the formerly cash-poor, land-rich school district is both cash poor and land poor.

Nonetheless, Schmeltzer looks back on his era on the City Council as a development disaster narrowly avoided. A 1984 draft agreement between the city and school district promised the schools zoning that would have allowed 99 apartments or condos at South School and 68 single family homes at North, View and Prospect schools.

"Because of Proposition 13 in 1978, the district and the city were both broke. Fortunately, the council and school board worked together to preserve the closed schools for the community as open space. Pier Avenue could have been a used-car lot and South Park and Valley Park all condos," Schmeltzer said.

"I think we acted with vision or we wouldn't even be having this conversation today about Measure Q because the North and View schools wouldn't be on the table," Schmeltzer said.

The lessons of 40 years ago have not been lost on Measure Q proponents or opponents.

Hermosa Beach schools Superintendent Pat Escalante was a young mother with a kindergarten-age child when Valley School reopened as a K-8 school in 1987.

"It had 650 students, which was near capacity, the day it reopened. Within five years, the district had to reopen View because enrollment kept increasing," Escalante said.

Haunting Escalante is the prospect that history will repeat itself. Assuming Measure Q passes, the proceeds will be sufficient to build classrooms for 1,686 students. But if enrollment continues to rise, the new classrooms could be at capacity on the day they open two to four years from now.

Or enrollment could fall. If that happens, Escalante said, she'd like to see surplus classrooms used to start a preschool program. Both neighboring school districts operate profitable preschool programs.

Escalante described the need for the bond money as self-evident.

Valley School has 948 students in third through eighth grade on a campus designed for 750 students, Escalante said.

View has 481 students in kindergarten through second grade on a campus designed for 216 students.

The district leases North School to Children's Journey Preschool (formerly Sea Sprites), which has approximately 200 children.

Since the district administrative offices were converted to classrooms at the start of the school year, Escalante and her staff have been working out of the Valley School maintenance warehouse. Next year, the administration will move into a city-owned building at South Park.

3 options address overcrowding

The district's Long Range Facilities Master Plan, completed last summer by architects gkkworks, proposes three options to deal with the overcrowding.

Option A would continue reliance on the current, improvised classrooms. Option B would reopen North school but without building new classrooms. Option C, which Escalante and the school board favor, would modernize the district's three schools and build new classrooms at View and North.

Option C proposes 690 students at Valley, 492 at View and 504 at North, and a total classroom capacity of 1,684.

A photo gallery of the schools on the district's website is titled "The Antique Roadshow."

North School still has an operator switchboard that dates to when the campus opened in 1924. A bronze plaque commemorating a classroom addition thanks President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Administrator of Public Works Harold L. Ickes. View is 60 years old.

Escalante noted that Hermosa's school property tax is presently \$17.97 per \$100,000 of assessed value, the lowest of the 11 South Bay school districts and the second lowest among Los Angeles County's 74 districts. The assessment is from the \$14 million Proposition J school bond passed in 2002. It will expire in 2031.

The proposed \$54 million bond would increase property taxes by \$29.50 per \$100,000 in assessed valuation, for a combined assessment of \$49.47.

By contrast, Manhattan's school property tax is \$70.75 per \$100,000 of assessed value, and Redondo's \$92.42.

Both neighboring school districts have long complained that Hermosa taxpayers are getting a free ride because they send their children to Redondo Union and Mira Costa high schools. Hermosa taxpayers do not contribute to the \$260 million school bond debt Redondo has incurred since 2000 nor the \$140.5 million school bond debt Manhattan has incurred since 1995.

Despite their relatively low school taxes, Hermosa voters rejected a bond measure in 2008 and a parcel tax in 2010.

The parcel tax failed by 20 percentage points, leaving the district's financial future so bleak that its strategic planning committee met with the superintendents of Redondo and Manhattan to discuss dissolving the Hermosa school district and merging.

In 2012, state voters approved Proposition 30. It raised taxes for high income tax payers as well as the sales tax to restore funding the state took from the schools during the 2008 recession.

With the economy rebounding, Escalante is confident Measure Q will get the 55 percent support needed for passage. A survey conducted last summer found that 65 percent of Hermosa voters would approve a new bond measure of \$19 per \$100,000 of assessed property value.

'Soft on people, hard on facts'

Measure Q opponents do not dispute the need for more classrooms. And they are sensitive to the danger of another divisive fight. Fights over the 1980s school closings were followed by a shorter, but almost equally bitter, fight after the 2002 passage of Prop. J.

Parents and Valley School neighbors sued to prevent Prop. J money from being spent to build a gym. They thought the money should have gone to more classrooms. The lawsuit failed but cost the district more than \$500,000 in legal fees.

"We're soft on people, hard on facts," said Marie Rice, a member of the Restore Hermosa Schools Committee, which opposes Measure Q.

Rice lives two doors west of North School and said she is not opposed to it being reopened.

"I would love to see North School reopened with 250 students. What we're disputing is the process that led to Measure Q. The school board didn't evaluate every option," Rice said.

"We sat through 40 school board and Long Range Facilities Master Plan meetings over the past two years, hoping for an open dialogue and a look at all of the district's assets," Rice said. "That didn't happen. At the superintendent's direction, the facilities committee focused exclusively on reopening North School."

Rice questions whether North, built in 1924 for roughly 250 students, can be expanded to accommodate 504 students, and whether the narrow residential streets around the school will be able to handle the increased school traffic.

She also questions the appropriateness of paving the northwest corner of Valley Park for a parking lot, as proposed in the master plan's Option C.

Miyo Prassas of Restore Hermosa Schools also says the district left too many questions unanswered before putting the bond measure on the ballot.

"We'd like to see a matrix of the pros and cons for North School, Pier Avenue, double decking Valley and purchasing Time Warner or other property," she said. "No site will be perfect, but we deserve a more transparent process."

"I still think reopening Pier Avenue is the best idea, but we can't be sure until we see the pros and cons," Prassas said.

Pier Avenue graduate Chris Miller (Class of '69) has been fighting to get Pier Avenue reopened since the 2002 Prop. J effort to expand Valley school. Her research brought to light that the 1978 Pier Avenue School sales agreement with the city gives the district the option to lease back the former school through 2028.

"Pier Avenue had 14 classrooms, a 500-seat auditorium, a gymnasium, tennis courts and easy access to a baseball diamond and basketball courts. ... Certain mitigation measures may be needed to house students and to relocate some Community Center uses. However, it would cost much less than the \$54 million bond the district is seeking to, in part, rebuild North School," Miller wrote in a recent letter to local newspapers.

Measure Q opponents also argue that reopening Pier Avenue would stop the displacement of the roughly 200 Children's Journey preschoolers at North School and say it would preserve the \$200,000 annual lease income that North generates.

Sheila Lay, a Children's Journey parent, told a joint meeting of the school board and City Council last Wednesday, "I've never voted against a school bond in my life. But I can't vote for something that will eliminate a large swath of education for our youngest children."

"There's nothing the district would like more than to offer preschool," Escalante replied, adding that she was formerly the director of preschool education at the Beverly Hills School District. Escalante said she is hopeful Measure Q's passage would enhance the possibility of the district opening a preschool.

Hermosa Beach City Manager Tom Bakaly responded to Recover Hermosa Schools with a letter to the editor, arguing the city is neither willing nor able to return Pier Avenue to the school district.

"The City of Hermosa Beach owns the Community Center and fully utilizes the space for community activities, including hosting at-risk teen programs, disabled adult programs and various other recreational activities," he wrote. "Together with the Governing Board of the HBCSD, we have determined that the Community Center site does not satisfy California state legal requirements to be used as a school."

Bakaly cited earthquake standards and building requirements in the state education construction code that he said make it too costly to reopen the Community Center as a school.

Miller disputes that Pier Avenue would require extensive earthquake retrofitting. In 2003, after the passage of Measure J, Miller retained earthquake retrofit specialist Breiholz Qazi Engineering to review the former school's condition.

David Breiholz reported his findings in a July 3, 2003, letter, stating in part, "I contacted the Office of the State Architect (DSA), Los Angeles office. ... The purpose of the inquiry was State-mandated seismic retrofit requirements for existing school buildings. There are no requirements for seismic upgrades of school buildings at this time. However, the State Architect 's Office will require that a structural condition assessment be performed to assure there were no structural alterations to the building(s) while the facility was not used as a public school."

Former school board trustee Reznichuk and former councilman Schmeltzer agree with both the Restore Hermosa Schools group and the city manager that the Pier Avenue sales agreement was drafted with the understanding the school district could reopen the school if enrollment rose. But the city manager argues that the state education construction code renders the agreement moot.

"The school district continued to use Pier Avenue after the sale for graduation ceremonies and some classes," Reznichuk said at Wednesday's meeting. "But times change. Laws change. The district doesn't own Pier Avenue and it does own North. We kept North for just this reason – to allow for enrollment to expand."