

OUSD gears up to spend \$10M of Measure J funds

Ojai Valley News (CA) - August 26, 2015

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- Section: News
- Page: A1

Last week, the Ojai Unified School District (OUSD) selected a company to help it spend the first \$10 million of Measure J construction funds. The board of trustees also discussed declining enrollment, and how they're keeping grass green on the sports fields during the drought.

Measure J Process Begins

The OUSD board of trustees unanimously approved a motion last week to hire Balfour Beatty Construction to oversee the first \$10 million in construction from the Measure J bonds. Specific projects are still in the works, but as the construction management company, Balfour Beatty will assist in developing the master plan. It'll also help with prioritizing projects, packaging them for efficiency and processing with the Division of the State Architect (DSA).

Balfour Beatty has managed construction projects in other Ventura County districts, but has also completed non-education projects. According to the company website, it is the fourth-largest education builder in the country.

"If you look at the \$35 million (total from the bond), and you look at a five year plan, you are trying to put in place (projects totaling) \$6 million a year," said Dennis Kuykendall, senior project manager with Balfour Beatty, speaking to the board last Tuesday. "That is a considerable amount of work. But most of that is going to happen in 90 days, during the summer."

Kuykendall said their focus is on the "plan to get to that — to make sure the first day school is out, you're ready to go. And then when the kids come back to school everything is buttoned up and ready."

He also informed the board about the current issue of "close-outs." The DSA has certain requirements, which are triggered by certain types of projects on school campuses. And there are forms, inspections and other steps in the construction process that must be met in order to be in compliance with state law. One step required at the end of a project is to have the proper paperwork signed off properly, and only then is the project considered "closed out." It has been discovered that the OUSD has not officially closed out some of their past projects — including some from the 1997 bond — so one of the first things Balfour will be working on is getting those taken care of, so the district can move ahead.

Declining enrollment Also at Tuesday's meeting,

the Board approved a motion to form a committee to look at declining enrollment in the OUSD. Board Members Linda Taylor and Jane Weil volunteered to prepare a plan for forming the committee. Bangser indicated that in his view neither he, nor any board members should serve on the committee. Other ideas were that the Parent Teacher organizations should be contacted to provide the committee with at least one representative from each school's parent population.

"The enrollment trend since 2001 has been a 36 percent loss, about 3 percent a year," said Larry Ferchaw, senior director of Dolinka Group. That translates into about 100 students who leave OUSD each year. The Dolinka Group looks at birth rates and projected birth rates prepared by the State Department of Finance in order to predict how many kindergartners OUSD will have in a given year.

Reasons contributing to local enrollment declines include reductions in birth rates and an aging population. Housing prices and availability of jobs also contribute to enrollment decline.

Water usage and field maintenance

Water usage restrictions from the drought are making maintenance of the athletic fields around the OUSD a challenge.

"You have to keep in mind, where we just add a few gallons of water to a turf surface, we might see a slight improvement, the areas will get greener. But can that be sustained and properly managed? That is the ultimate question," said Josh Brown, OUSD director of maintenance and operations. He explained that while the irrigation systems — the pipes — for the fields are currently all functional, it is clear that the systems will soon need work. Students walk on sprinklers, things get broken and parts deteriorate with age.

With only two staff members in the OUSD maintenance department, keeping things green can be a real challenge. The result? Not all the OUSD fields will be as green as they would in a year with normal rain.

"We like to take a holistic approach for all our school sites," said Brown. He said every school campus has a different type of soil, from the sandy loam at San Antonio Elementary School — which you can water all day and it won't hold any moisture — to the Porterville clay soil at Meiners Oaks Elementary, which stays wet and can be easy to over-water. Brown added that all irrigation systems are now on clocks, so nothing runs for very long at a time.

The Board got a lesson on types of grass, field maintenance and the value of a tractor. Brown said they are creating water plans for each school site based on priorities, and needs.

Class sizes

“There is a one-to two-student reduction in class size throughout the district. We will still be adjusting as students walk through the door. Overall we are looking at a drop to the mid to high 28s,” said Bangser about the elementary grades. That's a drop from 30.2 students last year. But along with that, about \$200,000 is being allocated to principals to hire credentialed teachers and classified support staff by the hour. These positions will reduce the class sizes for the core classes of language arts and math. Bangser said that brings the average class size in elementary schools to around 25 students “in those academic areas, once the hourly support program is implemented.”

At Matilija Junior High School, the class sizes will sit at about 31 students, and at Nordhoff High School, the classes are in the high 30s and “very occasionally up to 40,” said Bangser in an e-mail following Tuesday's meeting. That high student-to-teacher ratio is concerning to some, but OUSD staff said each teacher will have only one class on the high end of student numbers. That will result in full-time teachers seeing a total of about 156 students. Bangser said those averages are down at both Matilija and Nordhoff from last school year.

The next OUSD board meeting is set for Sept. 15.