



News Pointer > News

Dixie school district shelves parcel tax for now

By Paul Jones
Marinscope Newspapers

Published: Wednesday, February 17, 2010 2:03 PM PST

Despite positive polling results, the Dixie School District board of trustees recently decided against asking voters to increase the district's parcel tax this year. Although polling firm Godbe Research Associates found roughly 68 percent support for an increase of up to \$95 for the existing tax to help fund the district in light of budget cuts by the state, board members were advised to wait at least until Spring 2011. The district will be pushing to renew the existing parcel tax next year.

Last year, the district began considering a parcel-tax increase when Sacramento sought to alleviate the state's budget problems through cuts to school funds. Dixie, a "basic aid" school district, is funded mainly by local property taxes. However, it receives some money from the state, called "categorical funds," to pay for various programs. When schools funded primarily by the state — "revenue limit" districts — took budget cuts last year, the state made basic-aid schools pay their "fair share" in cuts by reducing categorical funds. As a result, the district has had to cancel summer school, layoff instructional assistants and furlough administrative staff, among other cuts. A parcel tax was envisioned as a way to combat those and future cuts, but Dr. Thomas J. Lohwasser, the district superintendent, said the district's board felt the timing was wrong.

"We'll be going out in a year to ask to renew our parcel tax, and if we went ahead this year asking for an increase, we'd be two years early," Lohwasser said. "The board was uncertain if the increase we were considering asking for would even meet our future needs, and we don't want to keep coming back to people. Our committee advised the board to wait."

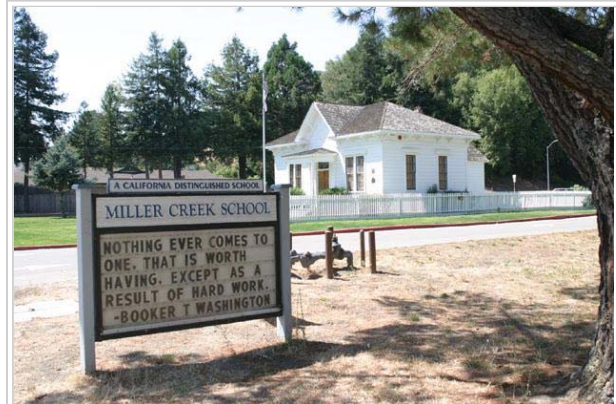
Lohwasser said it wasn't certain the district would push for an increase when it asks voters to renew the parcel tax in the near future. "It's a possibility; it would make sense for us to ask for a renewal and an increase, but there's no commitment as to when this is going to come up again."

In the meantime, Lohwasser said the district hoped an informational campaign could increase support for a parcel-tax increase in the future. "The committee advocated that the district work to make sure parents are aware of the impact these budget hits are having. The community was positive about the proposed tax increase in our polling, but when we propose it, we want to make sure people understand what's at stake. Every time the governor publishes a new explanation of the budget, we're going to go to parents and pass on the information directly."

Lohwasser said the district's existing parcel tax was similar to those of many school districts in Marin, and was the lowest in the county.

Dixie board Chair Bruce Abbott said that unlike many similar funding mechanisms, the tax didn't automatically increase. "That's one of our problems. When we want to increase it, it always sounds like we're asking for more money, but it's just to cover cost increases. There's no built-in escalator, so we have to up the amount to pay for salaries."

Print Page



File Photo The Dixie School District in San Rafael has decided to postpone pursuing a parcel tax considered earlier in the fiscal year as a way to combat state cuts to the district's categorical funds.

Lohwasser said that far from providing a surplus for the district, the parcel tax brought in just enough money for Dixie's revenue to match that of revenue limit districts. "We have about 15 teachers identified as funded by the parcel tax, as well as counselors and a nurse. Without it, it'd be pretty ugly."

Although the district hopes to receive support for a parcel-tax increase in the future, there are risks to waiting. Lohwasser acknowledged that if the economy doesn't recover, the support measured in the recent Godbe survey could drop off and the district might look upon the decision as a missed opportunity. And he said that lower appraisals of home values in the depressed real estate market have hit the school's revenue, even as Gov. Schwarzenegger has proposed a reduction in Average Daily Attendance funds of roughly \$200 per student on top of \$900,000 in categorical fund cuts spread out over the current and upcoming fiscal year beginning in July.

But Abbott said there were too many problems with moving forward on the proposed tax increase this year. "It's a scary year. There's so much on the ballot already, and there are these library parcel taxes being floated around. We've got two years before we go out for renewal of our property tax, and those campaigns cost money. If we go next year, we might be in better shape."

Meanwhile, the district is preparing to absorb reduced funding with further budget cuts.

"It will get hard this year," Abbott said. "We've cut summer school again, and we took money out from our reserves, which we can't do too often without it getting dangerous."

The district's situation is made more complicated because it must complete its budget before Sacramento's is finished.

"We've got to plan for the worst," Abbott said. "There's the May revision of the state budget, which is when we'll get a closer, firmer look, but the state Legislature won't have approved it, and we need a budget by June. So we'll have to create a budget based on that version, even if the cuts laid out in May aren't in the final state budget."

Copyright © 2010 - Marinscope Newspapers

[\[x\] Close Window](#)