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SCHOOLS

Another slice of the PIE

Fundraisers say more money needed to maintain school standards

by Alexandria Rocha

Although the Palo Alto public school district passed an annual $9 million parcel tax about four months ago, the local school fundraising organization isn't convinced the district's budget woes are over.

Stating that "our community can no longer depend on government funding to meet our education need," a letter from Partners In Education requests that parents with students in kindergarten through 12th-grade donate $500 per child. Similar request letters sent out last year — though they asked for slightly less — raised $1.77 million for the district.

This time around, PIE's aims to raise $2 million.

The letter comes after the Palo Alto Unified School District passed Measure A, an annual $493 million parcel tax that funds teacher salaries and small class sizes. Voters turned down a proposal for a higher amount in Nov. 2004, but Measure A was backed by more than 75 percent of voters in June.

This school year, the tax generated about $9 million. PIE's directors say asking residents to dig into their pockets beyond Measure A is a great, but necessary, challenge.

"There is a perception out there that the district has $9 million extra. Well, $7 million is already spent," said Susan Bailey, PIE president. "We're not above water yet. We were cut really, really badly over the last two years."

Bailey is referring to the increasing cost of the district's class-size reduction program, as well as the $6.5 million in cuts made from 2003 to 2005 because of sliding property taxes, increased enrollment and the state budget crises. The district also took $3.4 million from its reserves to

(continued on page 9)

Schools

(continued from page 3)

avoid additional cutbacks.

Since 2001, the district operated the small-class program for $5.5 million a year. However, with the rising costs of benefits, salaries and utilities, the program is now an annual $7 million expense.

With the passage of Measure A, the district did avoid further slashes to its offerings. The tax doesn't fund any new programs, but does restore some of the aforementioned cuts.

Here's the breakdown:

- $6.9 million, class-size reduction;
- $595,143, 34 class periods at the high schools;
- $352,000, eight classified employees;
- $350,08, 20 class periods at the middle schools;
- $262,563, three full-time elementary literacy and math teachers;
- $260,000, elementary support staff;
- $175,042, two counselors;
- $175,042, two full-time elementary librarians;
- $121,500 for one part-time dean at each high school;
- $50,000, one part-time elementary psychologist;
- $50,000, staff development;
- $20,000, elementary art program.

Even after the restorations, Bailey writes: "we still have much to do to keep our schools at the level of excellence we expect, the level our children will need to succeed in today's world."

The fundraisers want to emphasize, however, that $500 is only the suggested amount and parents should give what is affordable, said Simone Otus Coxe, PIE's director of public relations.

"We know that not everybody will be able to pay," said Betty Sincerbox, a parent on the Barron Park Elementary School PTA. "We've always told our parents to do what they can do. You would surely hope if they can do $2, $5, $10, $100 that they would just do it."

Each year, PIE's campaign deadline is March 1. After the funds are collected, a check is written directly to each school's principal. It can be used at their discretion.

Bailey said PIE's long-term goal is to raise $5 million to $7 million a year for the district. ■