

An open letter to the AUSD, Board of Education, Alameda residents, and anyone else who cares.

From: Marilyn Schumacher, concerned citizen, property owner, local Realtor

NO MORE RE-RUNS

I am tired of this re-run. This is the third time since my children began attending local schools in 1983 that these issues have come up. Everyone agrees the school funding system is broken. There is a newer group of folks in town who has no clue that Franklin and Paden schools were closed for years starting in the 1980's! They need to be told so they understand that 'fixes' don't work. We need solutions.

Aside from the inequities of funding due to the mess that the base closure has left us, and from the school system's former status as a department of the city government (which created funding problems when my husband and I arrived here in 1973), we can surely see that a grassroots campaign is needed -- one that looks out for the City of Alameda.

I found it 'cute' that the 3/11/08 Alameda Journal reported that our State Superintendent of Schools "called for lawmakers to change the law that requires the tax to receive a two-thirds majority to pass." I'm wondering why he wouldn't put his foot down against the Governor's raiding of school funds AND call for lawmakers to equalize funding among the school districts throughout the state. Maybe because he'd lose his job?

One of the facts of life in Alameda that affects funding is that we have a larger renter population than owner population in this town. Because of the way the city has developed over the years, good or bad, this creates an interesting use of city services that cannot easily be passed on to all users. Not all owners or renters use, have used, or will use the public schools. Yet property taxes and assessments continue to pay the way for city necessities. We all benefit directly or indirectly by good schools. It does not take a rocket scientist or a school administrator to figure out that good schools draw quality citizens from all walks of life, whether they reside as owners or not. And we hope that renter-residents will become owners and stay in town (yes, affordability is an issue), due to the draw of good schools.

The owners I know who have rental property (including myself) do NOT automatically pass insurance, property tax, various utility increases, and maintenance costs in the form of rent increases to our tenants. The market drives rents.

Please understand. I will be voting for the parcel tax. I will happily pay it. The issue is too important to take a pass on. Everybody I have spoken with, everybody, would rather pay for schools than prisons. And yet the competition for state funding of prisons is one of the line items most impacting state funding of schools.

Here are some items I have been wrestling with:

Elected officials whose districts go beyond Alameda. Since the problems we face as a city, county, and state are systemic, we have to deal with the folks who say they want to represent us. And often they don't. And we continue to vote for incumbents who ignore us! I am not aware of any of our locally-elected state officials who have done anything to attempt to rectify the education funding imbalances across our state. Then add to this that these same representatives continue to pass requirements that are foisted upon the school districts but do not provide the funding for them! Talk about time for an overhaul.

Senator Perata, a former teacher in Alameda, and now for many years a professional politician (note I did not say leader), knows he can send a representative to the island of Alameda to relay that he feels our pain. But he knows his constituent count is greater in Pleasanton or Dublin than in Alameda and he'd lose an election if he asked those folks to give up some of their education dollars to communities such as Alameda who are under-funded. Shame on these elected officials. And shame on us for staying with the status quo. We do get what we deserve and ask for. And it seems we aren't asking, expecting, or demanding enough.

I understand at a meeting 3/11/08 our AUSD Superintendent and associates addressed a group of local Realtors. As a local Realtor I was not able to attend because I was volunteering in Rob Siltanen's Alameda High Advanced Placement Econ and Government class. This section of the curriculum is volunteer-demanding and two of us involved in The Urban Plan (http://www.urbanplan.org/UP_Home/UP_Home_fst.html) have drafted 17

professionals, specifically trained for this function, who give generously of their work time and expertise to make this portion of the course meaningful. It is an honor and a privilege to work with Mr. Siltanen and the students.

But I digress. Support of this parcel tax by the Alameda Association of Realtors is critical. It is obvious to me, as it must be to others, after having cut so much out of the AUSD budgets for the past seven years, there must have been lots of fat to be trimmed. Yes, programs have suffered. But as my late husband told the Board of Education in the 1980s when he was on the Edison School Site Council, "If I ran my business the way you folks run the schools, I'd be broke and bankrupt." And then he sat down. And here we are.

Alternative revenue source consideration. Since I am not an expert at tax revenue generation (thank goodness), some ideas have come up in casual conversations about taxing the locals and supporting the schools such as

-a door tax.... For example, assessing \$60 per unit would be equivalent to a parcel tax of \$300 per year for a 5 unit property. That would translate to a rent increase of \$5 per month per unit per year, assuming the owner wishes to pass along the cost. Now that is manageable. But the Realtor group was told that was impossible. But it was an idea...

-how about a SMALL increase in the local sales tax? Everybody pays and the tax could be sunset. Possible? I don't know.

-most of the residents have an electrical bill. Place a small user fee for schools on that? Check out what was discussed in Jan. 15, 2002 at a City Council meeting regarding the Hospital District parcel tax when alternatives were being sought:

(02-040) Jeff Cambra, Citizens for Responsible Taxation and Financial Alternatives, thanked the Mayor and City Manager for facilitating the first meeting between his organization and Mr. O'Neill and Dennis Pagonos from the Alameda Hospital; submitted a copy of the questions presented to Mr. O'Neill and conditions which will be followed to keep the Hospital from being misquoted; stated hopefully, he be able to provide answers to the initial questions at the next Council meeting; his organization has prepared an alternative to the \$298 parcel tax; the new method overcomes concerns about distribution of the tax burden and prevents the tax from continuing if the Hospital closes; submitted a copy of the proposal; further stated the proposal is a flat, specific meter tax; there are over 33,000 meters serving property owners, renters and businesses in Alameda; charging each meter \$25 per month would provide \$8.25 Million per year; the rate could be flexible; if Hospital became profitable, the rate could be lowered; Alameda Power & Telecom would collect the tax, rather than the County, which charges a fee; if the voters approved the tax, funds could be distributed immediately after the election on the next electric bill; a Hospital tax district would not be required; the City would be purchasing availability of emergency medical services, similar to purchasing road paving or tree trimming services; if the Hospital became insolvent, the City could terminate the purchase contract; the

Hospital's attorney indicated the said method could not be used because of hospital district law; however, the method [of taxation] does not require a hospital district; therefore, hospital district law does not apply; requested the Council to direct the City Attorney to provide the Council and residents of Alameda with the City's position on the viability of said proposal.

Transparency of the school budget. In this day, telling me that the state requires certain forms and accounting is fine. But how about giving citizens a report card of how effectively and efficiently EACH school is run? I don't want to hear that it can't be done or that we've never done it that way before. We pay for these schools and we have a right to understand just how they operate. We must hold the school district management accountable -- NOW. I'm talking about everything from paper management to utility costs. Answers to questions regarding property management to personnel management should be able to be answered. Are teachers being encourage to bring in experiential programs like The Urban Plan that literally has NO cost to the schools yet are designed to meet curriculum requirements.

Parent and other volunteer participation. The PTA knows what schools have the least parent participation but most of the citizens don't. Maybe there are ideas out there that would be forthcoming from the citizens at large that could help the situation. Maybe not. But communication of such items is not embarrassing, it's a necessity! Are the volunteer programs for after school that assist students with reading (similar to adult programs at the library) or with English as a second language (similar to the Adult School program). We do these because we are a community; not to separate schools. We do it to see all students progress.

Use of the parcel tax. I was completely taken aback when I found out, I believe last year, that the some portion of the existing parcel tax was used for salaries! That was not how it was sold to voters. What's it going to be this time? Will there be transparency on this? Don't even think about holding back on facts like this again. Tell it like it is! If we find out after the fact, the public trust is violated and it will be a long time before a climate of trust is generated again.

And while we're at it, I include three 'off limit' subjects nobody wants to discuss:

1) Charter schools. How about an ACCURATE report about the real costs of the charter schools in this town? Costs to the district in terms of continued expenses, and income lost, and maintenance of the programs. I mean EACH program. While

I understand the incredible good specialized public schools provide, isn't it a shame that they are so limited to the public?

2) Public employee pensions. If folks don't yet have a clue about the mess that the City of Vallejo is in, I suggest they Google 'Vallejo bankrupt'. Contract terms with employee groups that city officials/management have either chosen to ignore -- or flat-out didn't understand what they were agreeing to -- have not only put most cities at risk, but union employees as well. Employees may be soon find their benefits highly reduced or their pensions wiped out because there will be no money to fund them.

Face it. It's over. It's high time that the AUSD (and all Alameda city officials - this problem is not isolated to teachers) get real and calculate when the fountain is going to run dry -- and tell us! Why don't we combine what we pay teachers in salary and benefits into straight salaries, and let them manage their own retirements, like the rest of us mere mortals? Start with the next contracts. Too simple? Maybe. It's more out of pocket up front but it won't destroy a city and peoples' lives. Do you prefer risk? Then carry on. It is impossible to continue to fund retirements and all the other benefits for decades after people retire.

I had the opportunity (yes, I need to get a life) to watch what I think was a re-run of a recent City Council meeting in which the method of funding of fire and police pensions, perhaps other city employees pensions also, was being explained in the most convoluted way I have ever heard. I did not hear one city council member comment 'what the heck does that mean to our city, our taxpayers, and our citizens?' And say it in a way the citizens can understand it. If the council members can't explain it, maybe we're being sold a bill of goods.

3) Teacher Tenure. The time for this has come and gone. Once again, school district management needs to figure out what is best for its students and the folks whom they serve. If anybody can explain to me the benefits to me of tenure, I would love to hear it. I'm looking for win-win situations here.

As my astute 27-year-old son said recently, "Mom, the US operates in either crisis or complacency modes." So, here we are in several BIG crises. But what wonderful times to find SOLUTIONS, rather than fixes.

Here's the good news! I expect that we have the talent, expertise, and population willing to volunteer for short, intense periods and then get out and return to their areas of expertise. Most of the experts just need to be asked. And we need to find out who they are. We are a community. Let's act like the fabulous one we are! Everybody participates and is included. And everybody wins!

With that, let's play 20 Questions. I have 20 questions about the current funding crisis, the proposed tax remedy, and other costs our district is facing:

1. How many residential units are subject to the proposed parcel tax?
2. How many residential units have opted out of the existing parcel tax?
3. How many are expected to opt out of the second tax, even if they've been paying the first?
4. Is the senior exemption for residential units only? Commercial/industrial?
5. Who created the wording for this tax? Consultants? The Board of Education? AUSD management?
6. Where can the EXACT wording of the parcel tax proposal be found for citizens to review?
7. Does this proposed parcel tax actually solve the funding problem?
8. Understanding that the community as a whole is significantly impacted by the quality (or lack thereof) of schools, what other types of assessments have been considered? And why have they been eliminated?
9. What other budget-boosting activities (long- and short-term) are being pursued by other facets of AUSD and its associated organizations such as the Alameda Education Fund, Alamedans for Better Schools?
10. Why hasn't some type of size/fee schedule been applied to commercial properties, with an absolute cap? Since Alameda desperately needs business tax

revenues, this current proposed assessment does not seem balanced when considering other needs of the city.

11. Why not have community input BEFORE throwing this on the ballot? I get that time is of the essence. But your community deserves to speak.

12. When establishing the amount for the proposed parcel tax, has the real NEED been addressed, or is it based merely on an amount that consultants think voters will approve?

13. What is the REAL cost to educate ONE AUSD student? I understand this was asked at the Realtor meeting on 3/11/08 and one answer was the amount the district was supposed to receive from the state (consequently NOT an answer), and another answer was that we didn't get enough. If ANY body from management cannot answer such a direct question, then we've only touched the tip of the iceberg in accountability.

14. Who or what determines whether a student who lives outside the district may attend an AUSD school?

15. Under what circumstances is an out-of-district student deemed ineligible or asked to leave?

16. How many AUSD students living outside the school district are accounted for? How often does that accounting take place?

17. Realistically, how many unaccounted for out-of-district students attend AUSD schools?

18. What costs are associated with maintaining closed schools? How much does it cost to keep a closed school?

19. How much does it cost to re-open a closed school? (Use specifics from the last time schools were closed and then apply some factor for increases in the cost of repairs and deferred maintenance.) Are the economies of savings out of whack?

20. What kind of income was received by AUSD when closed schools such as Franklin and Paden were leased? What kind of leases were in place? Were the tenants responsible for all maintenance and/or repairs?

Let's not keep playing re-runs. It's time for creativity. I eagerly await your answers. And I thank you for your consideration.

Marilyn Schumacher