

DNUSD: Survey says community lukewarm to school bond

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The Del Norte Unified School District wanted to take the pulse of the community on whether it supported voting for a facilities bond in the fall. The consultant they hired to take the survey did not return with good news.

Jon Isom, of Isom Advisors, an education financial advisory firm from Orange revealed the survey's findings. He told Del Norte trustees on March 12 that only 50 percent of those surveyed supported a ballot measure when informed of what the money would be spent on. That is short of the 55 percent needed by those voting for a general obligation bond measure to pass.

"So one would say that's not great news, you want to be at 55 or 60 or above there. This gives you a pretty good read of voters' mindsets during that time frame," Isom said.

He added it was not all bad news.

"When it is all said and done, the district has good support for projects. You have some sensitivity to the highest tax rates. So there is a question whether or not the district could pass a measure," Isom said.

He said in his 12-plus years working with the school district, he knows it has a conservative voter base.

"In order to proceed, if the district is to have any chance, it is to get key stakeholders lined up behind it. So if you think, 'We'll just throw it out there and run a really good campaign,' it's not going to pass," Isom said.

He said the school district needed to get elected officials, businesses, teachers, parents, staff members and a broad coalition of support of people to say, "Yes, we need this in Del Norte County to be done and we're willing to get behind you to see it done."

“I wouldn’t say don’t go at this point. I would say take the next six months to shore up that support. And if you do, I would say you could overcome a marginal survey,” Isom summarized.

However, that support took an immediate hit when Del Norte Teachers Association President Marshal Jones said there was no trust between the teachers and the district in the wake of contract negotiations that have remained unresolved after one year.

“I for one have always said schools should be the most beautiful things in the county because they’re a reflection of our county,” Jones said. “But at the same time, how could we even entertain this with what we’ve gone through in the last year? There’s no trust. I would pay it... But we’ve got to repair some damage here. There’s no trust. And I’m really saddened by that because I want our schools to look great. I’m tired of walking down a hallway with rotted walls and with pipes I have to let the water run for 30 seconds otherwise it’s brown. I’m one teacher, but I’m sure many feel that way.”

Del Norte County District 3 Trustee Frank Magarino reminded the board of another problem facing the school district — a competing tax initiative from the county and Crescent City.

Magarino said in January, the City Council and the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors passed unanimously a similar type survey to go out to the public for a sales tax assessment specifically for public safety.

“Public safety has suffered tremendously in this community for quite some period of time. I’d hate to see education and public safety pitted against each other on a November ballot. Both issues are equally needing in our community at this time,” Magarino said. “Be aware a public safety issue is likely to move forward after a similar survey we’re expecting results back from next month. It might come out similarly, we don’t know yet. What we do know is if two, tax-based initiatives were to appear the November ballot, odds are both would be likely to lose.”

Isom admitted had he known what the city and county were up to, he would have asked an additional question on his survey that tests two measures on the same ballot.

“You ask ‘would you vote for one or the other, both or neither.’ Because that gives you pretty good direction as to whether one, both or neither go forward,” Isom said.

For example, he said in 2016 Shasta College, Shasta High School District, the Shasta Elementary District and the City of Redding all had four different taxes on the ballot. Three of the four passed, Isom said.

Of the more than 15,000 registered county voters, Isom surveyed over 257 random households March 5-10 to assess if the community supported a \$36.5 million bond to address about \$280 million in repairs district officials feel are needed in area schools.

“I wanted to test attitudes toward the district, specific projects the district is looking to improve, toward tax rates and ultimately would you be willing to support a bond measure at all,” Isom said.

His first questions found a positive satisfaction with the quality of education being provided, with 53% saying the district was heading in the right direction and 69% saying the quality was excellent, good or fair.

To gauge the representation of the voters surveyed, Isom found 46 percent never had children attend DNSD schools while the remaining 54% had children or grandchildren who were attending or had attended.

Isom then asked a “pre-benchmark” question asking if they would support a \$36.5 million bond to pay for classroom and school facility improvements before knowing specifically what it went toward. He found only 48.1% said yes or leaned yes, while 43.9% said no or leaned no.

“The school district needs to achieve 55% threshold to pass. That’s not 55% of registered voters; rather 55% of votes cast on the measure. If you have 10,000 votes, you need to have 5,500 say yes,” Isom explained.

He then broke the survey down to how the money would be spent on specific projects and found many were much more or somewhat more likely to vote in favor of the measure. That included projects ranging from repairing/replacing leaky roofs and constructing science labs to repairing and replacing deteriorating plumbing and sewer systems and updating inadequate electrical systems. All were above the 60% threshold.

Upgrading playground/playfields and replacing temporary portables with permanent classrooms received the least support.

Then he tested tax tolerances and found about 53% supported paying \$60 per year per \$100,000 of assessed value. Support improved at proposed lower tax assessment rates — 55% supported \$42 a year and 58% supported \$36 a year.

“Does that mean I should go for just \$36 or \$42 — what’s the right amount?” Isom proposed. “The answer is you don’t have to have a hard-fast rule if you didn’t get above 55 percent, but it is an important guideline.”

Isom said it’s fine if the school district cannot get enough support from the community to get it above the 55% threshold for the upcoming Nov. 3 ballot.

He said the next opportunity is June of 2022 gubernatorial primary. California allows districts to go every other year on a regularly scheduled election. But those dollars would not be available for another three or four years if a measure were successful then, Isom added.

District 1 Trustee Don McArthur wanted to know the timeline the board had to make decisions assessing getting the community behind its bond efforts.

“It needs to be submitted, the resolution language, with plan, tax rate and project list and how big the is bond, to the county registrar Aug. 7, or 88 days before election day,” Isom said.