

Guest Column: Schools' Enrollment Down, Board Keeps Spending

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I haven't been to a school board meeting since I learned the Oversight Committee for the previous \$25 million General Obligation Bond was a joke, even when it actually met.

For the past 16 years the County's property owners and renters have paid down less than a quarter of the amount owed on the 2008 version of "Help! It's for the children" Bond. According to the District, at the time, student occupation growth had made it imperative that the District's classroom shortage necessitated some new classrooms and modernization. Well, we didn't get any new classrooms. A couple of gyms and a mixed bag of odds and ends completed the 16 year long expenditure billed as "a critical need for more classrooms."

The latest ask by the Del Norte Unified School District is for \$59 million with interest making the tab on the 30 year note over \$100 million. I'm quite sure in the run up on the November election, Johnnie has a bucket

on his desk to catch drips from a leaking roof but we are assured no salaries or benefits will be paid from the Bond. Sound familiar?

Before we are even close to paying off the previous Bond, another catastrophe is claimed to lurk in the DNUSD's aging schools and a much larger pot of money is essential to stave off collapse of the District. Before we all fall prey to another bit of the District's chicanery, particularly in light of the not particularly glowing product being produced by the District, quick look at the most recent budget report produced the following: Of the District's 11 schools, the District ranks their respective physical condition as two in good condition, seven in fair condition and only two in poor condition.

Considering the fact the student population will reduce to about 3,000 by the years 2025/26, wouldn't a more prudent action be to mothball the schools in poor condition and shift their population to schools in better condition without obligating the County's financially beleaguered condition to yet another tax, a potential solution. For decades, regular maintenance was an afterthought by past and present boards. Salaries and benefits were annually a contentious Spring sport between school administration and employees over pay and benefit increases. Now it is revealed that local salaries and benefits compare favorably with surrounding areas. While this be the time for that maintenance and modernization, it appears the good times of budget windfall during Covid are coming back to bite the local school district, \$80 plus millions last year to a little over \$67 million in the coming year and it doesn't get any better after that.

Perhaps it is time for the District to look hard at its financial needs and do a little serious trimming rather than ask for more money from the local community.