

SCHOOL BOND FUNDS: Where did all the money go?

SB News Press
July, 2005

Bob Noël

In March, 2000, a \$67 million bond measure was approved by voters to pay for repair, refurbishing and modernization at Santa Barbara area junior and senior high schools. Now, five years later, we read that the money is running out before all of the work is done.

School district staff are worried about finishing all fire, life and safety projects, not mention the possibility that disability-access projects may not be completed. And some special interest groups are worried about such things as gymnasiums and swimming pools. Where did all the money go?

One answer is increased construction costs. While a few projects came in under budget, most have cost more than estimated. An extreme case is the Dos Pueblos Auditorium. \$8 million was set aside for it. Actual costs are half-again higher.

Another answer is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). None of our schools were up to standard regarding access for disabled students and staff. Santa Barbara High School, an early 20th Century two-story hillside facility, had many problems. The district was sued for non-compliance, and the settlement agreement requires full ADA compliance at all campuses.

But, this not the whole story. Other projects have taken bites out of Measure V funds, projects that are far less compelling morally.

Swimming pools are a case in point. San Marcos High and Dos Pueblos High were originally scheduled for \$700,000 in pool repairs and upgrades. \$800,000 was set aside for Santa Barbara High's pool. Booster groups had grander visions. Santa Barbara High School boosters raised \$277,915. The existing pool was demolished, and elegant new pool facilities were built. Boosters at Dos Pueblos High School raised a whopping \$1,100,000. Their goal is an Olympic class 50-meter pool complex.

The problem is that there were no reality-checks on these visions. New pool facilities were designed and plans drawn costing \$3,617,730 more than boosters raised. That fundraising shortfall contributed significantly to the present crunch.

Here are some other items off project lists that account for millions in Measure V funds.

- A stadium press box
- Additional bleachers and refurbishment of playing fields
- A new softball scoreboard
- Refurbished gymnasiums; new locker rooms
- Playing field and high jump upgrade
- Replacement of tennis courts

- Track upgrades
- Stadium renovation
- New parking lots

There is a disconnect here. Measure V was not about those kinds of projects. Here is the actual text.

“To repair and upgrade every school in the Santa Barbara High School District and achieve facility parity, replace old portables, repair electrical systems, provide handicap access, replace broken plumbing, gas and heating systems, repair roofs, rewire classrooms for technology, build an auditorium at Dos Pueblos High School, build necessary new classrooms and make the District eligible for State matching funds, shall the District issue \$67 million of bonds at interest rates within the legal limit?”

Clearly, voters were told that their money would be used for real and pressing needs. Requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) had to be met; infrastructure repairs were needed; and dilapidated classrooms had to be replaced or repaired. An auditorium was included for Dos Pueblos High School, because it is the only high school that does not have an auditorium.

As the \$67 million has been spent, different priorities appear to have come into play—what former the Superintendent called “wish-list” items. Thus, a press box, a softball scoreboard and a senior’s parking lot have been completed while roof and window repairs and upgrading a heating and ventilating system have not?

How did wish-list items come to displace priorities in the ballot language? I have been The Superintendent had moved on; the Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Education retired; the chief financial officer and the head of district facilities both left; and all three high schools experienced changes in leadership. Cumulatively, this was equivalent to a crashed hard-drive. Corporate memory was all but lost.

Without control from the top, and without delegated authority, individual campus advisory committees became decision-making venues. School principals, athletics people, interested faculty, parents, and booster groups participated (turnover among parents was commonplace). At this level, viewpoints tended to be parochial and interest groups influential.

Fortunately, there were also some people on campus advisory committees whose main concerns were infrastructure repairs, modernization and compliance. They saw to it that basic projects did get scheduled. Middle managers and architects played an especially important role in this.

Setting priorities is a quintessential policy-making activity. Who made policy in regard to such projects? It was not the School Board. Conceptual designs and cost estimates were not approved by the Board. Detailed drawings were not approved by the Board before being sent for State review. Nor were final plans approved by the Board before being put out for bid. The Board has not seen Measure V projects until the eleventh hour, when construction contracts were presented for batch-approval on its Consent Agenda. By that time, they were, in effect, irreversible.

For all intents and purposes, campus committees have decided what was to be built. There has been no global view. But now, thanks to newly asserted oversight from the top, a comprehensive

report is being compiled. It is not a pretty picture. Sorting out priorities is not going to be easy, now that so much has been set in concrete.

The bottom line is that, if Santa Barbara school districts are ever again to find public support for a construction bond, they must deliver what was promised in Measure V.

Bob Noël is a member of the Santa Barbara Board of Education and Emeritus Professor in Political Science at UCSB.