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School bond issue seen as factor in trustee race

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RANCHO SANTA FE — Proposition Y, the \$46 million bond measure on the Nov. 5 ballot, was designed to lay the groundwork for the expansion of the Rancho Santa Fe School District.

But there is uncertainty over how the money would be spent, and the ballot measure has become something more: a referendum on voter confidence in the school board.

Two months after trustees put the measure on the ballot, they have backpedaled on the location of a new school and pledged to return to the voters for approval before spending all the money.

If the measure receives the 55 percent support needed for passage, taxes would increase by \$30 a year for each \$100,000 of assessed property value.

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Backers of the bond say it would replace trailer classrooms and bathrooms at R. Roger Rowe School while easing crowding in the growing school district.

The proposition would pay for the land and construction of a second campus, followed by renovations to the Rowe school, and land for a third campus in Elfin Forest, where growth is expected over the next decade.

Opponents have seized on two issues:

- The unpopularity of a site previously proposed for a new school.

- The size of the bond and the power it would give to a board still deciding where to place a new campus.

These polarizing issues over the measure also are evident in the race for school board, where one incumbent and five challengers are vying for two seats.

"It comes down to a matter of trust and electing board members that you feel comfortable will do the right thing with the money," said Kathy Stumm, the board president who is running for re-election.

To placate residents critical of the amount, the board agreed to hold an advisory election administered by the Registrar of Voters before issuing more than \$27 million in bonds.

Under the terms of the bond, the remainder couldn't be sold for at least a decade, Superintendent Daniel Vinson said.

Trustee Lindy Bowman said, "We decided that \$46 million is just a huge amount of money, and people were going to look askance at it."

The advisory election would ask voters to approve additional bond sales. If they give the approval, that would ensure continued community support, said Bowman. The board has promised to abide by voters' wishes, although advisory elections aren't legally binding.

Meanwhile, the location where the proposed school would be built hasn't been decided. The school board has backed away from a location because trustees acknowledged it could have sunk Proposition Y.

The targeted spot for the campus was initially 27 1/2 acres along Del-Dios Highway east of the boundaries of the Rancho Santa Fe Association, popularly known as "the covenant."

It was far from ideal. But the previous spots had their own drawbacks, and there was a three-year search for land.

Roland and Ramona Sahn, the landowners, didn't want to sell their property and promised a lengthy legal battle. Many Rancho Santa Fe residents, as well as the pro-bond committee, balked at the prospect of invoking the district's power of eminent domain.

The location even ruffled residents outside the school district in the Hacienda Santa Fe subdivision across the street from the property.

They say they would have

had to contend with traffic congestion from a school their children wouldn't be allowed to attend. They, too, hired a legal team.

The board relented and resumed its search.

The district is determining whether it can cope with environmental issues such as overhead power lines on previously rejected locations for the new school.

"By the time we find a site, we'd like to have the money to purchase it," the superintendent said. "If we don't pass a bond all of this is for naught."

However, many of the nine residents who took out bond opposition statements distrust the board's claims that it is rethinking the school site and will be bound by the advisory election.

"This board has screwed up royally," said school board candidate Demetri Brizolis. "First they come up with this \$46 million bond, then, oops, it's too much. Then they target the Sahn site, and now, oops, everybody's against it. How could you trust a board like that?"

Ralph Whitworth, chairman of the pro-bond committee, said the board is in a tough position — on the one hand being rebuked for not planning for a second school early enough, and now for asking voters for a hefty sum to make long-range plans.

Within the next five years, an additional 300 students are expected to enroll in the 832-student kindergarten-through-eighth-grade district. The Rowe campus now has 16 trailer classrooms, and temporary bathrooms are on the way.

"Yes, all these issues concern me," Whitworth said of the board's irresolution on the school location. "But when you step back from this it really is a no-brainer. You can't have a site until you have the money because nobody is seriously going to sell you a site contingent on passage of a future bond."

The bond has many supporters, including the Rancho Santa Fe Association and former Superintendent Roger Rowe. The bond committee is sending mailers and calling residents to clarify how the bond money would be used.

Bond supporters say the measure would make badly needed upgrades to the Rowe school, where buildings date to 1955. That would include a new building to replace trailer classrooms, and wiring for technology that would allow more computers and telephone lines.

According to the measure, the second campus would be located outside the covenant boundaries.

"There is a tremendous amount of uncertainty about the site, and the originally \$46 million bond issue was probably not put together as smartly as one would," said school board candidate John Stiker, who is the publicity chairman for the pro-bond committee.

"But it's a testament to this school board that they're listening to this community rather than forcing these things down their throats."

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