

July 22, 2002

Honorable Rodney S. Melville
Presiding Judge
Santa Barbara Superior Court
312-C East Cook Street
Santa Maria, CA 93456-5369

Dear Judge Melville:

The purpose of this letter is to respond to Finding #4 and Recommendation #4 of the 2001-2002 Grand Jury report on Voter Intent, reported as follows:

Finding #4: I98, a bond measure for the Santa Barbara Elementary District, was passed to fund improvements to various elementary schools and build an alternate school in Hidden Valley.

Recommendation #4: Santa Barbara Elementary School District should begin (four years after the bond issue) the process of designing and building the new school as was voted for by the citizens in measure I98.

The \$25 million I98 bond, passed by the voters in June of 1998, reads as follows:

“To ease overcrowding and accommodate class-size reduction by building a new school and replacing old portables, to upgrade classrooms for technology, to construct permanent libraries, and to repair items like wiring, plumbing, heating, and leaky roofs, shall the Santa Barbara Elementary School District issue \$25,000,000 of bonds at interest rates within the legal limit for construction of school facilities, acquisition of sites and classrooms and repair and improvement of schools throughout the District?”

The purpose of the bond was to address identified facilities needs, such as renovation and modernization of aged school facilities and the creation of additional space to support program and enrollment demands. The ballot language of the bond allows considerable flexibility as to how these needs would be met. The status of I98-funded projects is outlined below.

1. Renovation and Modernization of Various Elementary Schools and Construction of Four Libraries

Significant bond-funded improvements have already been completed on many of the District's elementary school campuses. In fact, \$9 million of the \$25 million bond was allocated for

renovating and modernizing existing elementary schools while \$3 million was allocated for constructing four libraries. More than 60% of that \$9 million renovation/modernization allocation has been used to complete identified projects, and more work is planned in the months ahead:

- **Adams Elementary School.** The school's roof has been replaced; one portable is being replaced this summer. Next year, another 15 portables will be replaced and reconfigured. The new library will be built within two years.
- **Cleveland Elementary School.** A wing of portables were replaced and/or reconfigured. Additionally, a new restroom facility was installed and emergency access was improved.
- **Franklin Elementary School.** Four old portables at the Franklin Children's Center have been replaced and reconfigured. Twelve classrooms at Franklin will be replaced and reconfigured in the next year, after which the new library will be constructed.
- **Harding Elementary School.** A new science lab was constructed.
- **McKinley Elementary School.** Portions of the roof were repaired. Hillside repairs were completed and a serious drainage problem was corrected. This summer, 15 portables are being replaced and reconfigured and a new bathroom facility will be installed.
- **Monroe Elementary School.** The entire school has been renovated and modernized, at a cost of \$1.4 million. Major structural repairs have been completed at a cost of \$1.2 million.
- **Peabody Charter School.** The first phase of modernization has been completed at a cost of nearly \$1.3 million. Two old kindergarten buildings were replaced. Construction on the new library will begin this fall
- **Washington Elementary School.** Washington's bond-funded projects will be the last to be completed. This school is in the coastal zone and the permit process is lengthy. Additionally, issues of access and egress must be addressed as they relate to an adjacent property. Once these issues are addressed, aging portables will be replaced/reconfigured and a new library will be constructed.

2. Acquisition of a Downtown School Site

The greatest density of students in the Santa Barbara Elementary District is downtown, so \$4.5 million of I98 bond funds was allocated to address facilities needs in that area. In fact, on a daily basis more than 1,000 students are bussed from their downtown attendance areas to elementary schools on the Mesa (i.e., McKinley, Monroe, and Washington).

The need for another school in the downtown area has been the subject of discussion for years. The focus on school facilities in the downtown area was the subject of a joint City Council/Board of Education task force, which has convened periodically during the past year. Although this committee identified properties owned by public agencies, a parcel of land large enough to house 400-500 students could not be found. The Districts own a building in downtown Santa Barbara at 720 Santa Barbara Street, the site of the Districts' administrative offices. Several years ago, after the passage of the I98 bond, the Board of Education made the decision to convert half of the Santa Barbara School District's administrative offices into a downtown school (Santa Barbara Community Academy). The cost of converting half of the District Office into classrooms was \$2 million. The Academy currently houses about 225 students, 75% of whom

live within walking distance of the school. Recently, the Board voted to move the entire District Office and to expand the Academy to its maximum capacity of approximately 400 students. The build out of the District Office into a downtown elementary school site will begin within the next 18 months. The remaining \$2.5 million will be used to construct an auditorium, cafeteria, bathrooms, playground, and additional classrooms.

3. Construction of a New Facility for Open Alternative School, Santa Barbara Charter School, and a 400-student Elementary School

Immediately following bond passage on June 2, 1998, the Board of Education and District staff began planning a new \$11.5 million school on the Hidden Valley site, property owned by the District since 1967. The goal was to have a school built and operational within three years. The planning process that has taken place has been public, inclusive, and consistent with the letter and spirit of the bond.

The Board and District staff have spent more time and resources on this issue than any other I98 issue. During the past 4 1/2 years, no fewer than 46 Board of Education meetings have been devoted to I98, a majority of them on Hidden Valley and/or the housing of Open Alternative School and Santa Barbara Charter School. Several committees were formed to identify and study various options and/or address the most significant issue: access. Please see the attached list.

To date, the only bond money spent on the Hidden Valley project has been less than \$300,000 to determine whether or not it is feasible to build a school on that site. The vast majority (\$10 million) of the bond amount designated for Hidden Valley has not yet been sold. As a result, local residents have not paid any tax dollars on this portion of the I98 bond.

A year ago, the Board hired a team of master planners to evaluate various housing/facilities issues and to develop an action plan. This action plan will include recommendations for where to house Open Alternative School and Santa Barbara Charter School. The master planners will complete their work and present a report to the Board by December 2002.

In order to adequately address this portion of the bond allocation, it is necessary to talk about the three schools separately. But first it is important to emphasize the primary reason why the Hidden Valley property is no longer being considered as a viable option for these three schools. From the beginning, the residents of Hidden Valley expressed strong opposition to the District building an 800-student facility on this property and accessing the school through the neighborhood. Residents attended numerous Board meetings and stated over and over again their strong opposition to the Hidden Valley project, based on access issues. Hidden Valley residents hired an attorney to represent the concerns of the neighborhood.

The District formed a committee and a study was undertaken to determine if access could be gained another way. Ultimately, after extensive consideration, the District concluded that a second road would be very expensive (estimated between \$1–2 million) and, thus, not feasible. The \$11.5 million allocated for this three-school campus was barely enough to build the facility,

never mind the additional cost of a road. There were other complications including the approvals necessary to develop the road along a creek bed, moving buildings on adjacent properties, etc.

At several points during the past three years, legal counsel has been sought regarding the Hidden Valley site. Both the District's own legal counsel and bond counsel have advised the Board of Education and District staff that the District is not legally required to build at Hidden Valley. While the discussions have focused on the viability of Hidden Valley as a building site, this has not affected the District's continued commitment to meeting the facilities needs of Open Alternative School and Santa Barbara Charter School.

The three schools that were originally planned for the Hidden Valley site are:

- **400-student Elementary School.** For almost ten years prior to the passage of the bond, the Elementary District's enrollment steadily increased from 5,179 in 1990 to a peak of 6,201 in 1998, an increase of over 1,000 students. Although projections indicated that the growth would begin to slow down in the late 1990s, no one could have predicted the sharp decline in enrollment that began in 1998 and has continued since. In fact, projections now indicate that the Elementary District will reach a low of 5,205 in 2010–2011, a drop of almost 1,000 student from the peak in 1998. Clearly, there is no longer a need to build a new 400-student elementary school on the Hidden Valley site.
- **Santa Barbara Charter School.** Several options have been considered as to where to house Santa Barbara Charter School. The options have included: building a campus on the Hidden Valley site; building a campus on a piece of property owned by the Santa Barbara High School District; renovating and improving the school's existing facilities at Goleta Valley Junior High School; or housing the school at La Cumbre Middle School, a school that previously served grades 6-8 and will soon serve grades 7-8. The "La Cumbre option" is viable because, beginning this fall, La Cumbre will not have 300 6th grade students in attendance. In September 2002, a proposal for Santa Barbara Charter to be housed at La Cumbre Middle School will be presented to the Board for their consideration and it is very likely that a decision will be made soon after. If the Board approves this recommendation, renovations will be completed during the 2002-2003 school year and Santa Barbara Charter School will move to the La Cumbre Middle School campus during the summer of 2003.
- **Open Alternative School (OAS).** A number of options have also been considered regarding the housing of OAS, including: building a site at Hidden Valley; building a site at La Cumbre Middle School; renovating and improving their existing facility; or co-locating OAS on an elementary campus within the District. Where to house Open Alternative is one of the tasks that the master planners have been asked to provide immediate assistance.

We recognize that some of the issues are being addressed in a somewhat different manner than was envisioned at the time of the 198 bond election. Because of changed circumstances, such as declining enrollment, and the challenges involved in building a school at the Hidden Valley site, we believe our current approach not only meets the legal requirements of the bond

issue, but also meets the District's needs in a more cost effective way. We are striving to make the best use of the I98 bond monies, both for the sake of our students and to give our taxpayers the best value for their investment in our District.

Thank you for this opportunity to update the community on the Santa Barbara Elementary School District's use of I98 bond funds.

Sincerely,

Deborah A. Flores, Ph.D.
Superintendent

Enclosure: list of I98 Board meetings, January 27, 1998 through June 11, 2002.