



The Ross Retort

by Lisa Ross

CARMEL VALLEY'S NEW GOLD-PLATED DRIVE-BY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

With California's economy toasted and vibrating by electrocution, there is nothing more certain, except perhaps death and taxes, than the expectation that the state legislature will place a school facilities bond measure on the November ballot.

It is equally certain that taxpayer watchdog groups, demanding accountability when school districts decide for whom, with what, and to where tax money is spent before bonds are passed, will be hunting for any sign of fiscal strangeness to defeat this very important school bond.

And that is why the tiny Solana Beach School district is heading into the eye of a state-wide political storm if funding overseers allow them to go forward with a plan to build a \$40 million elementary school on arguably the most expensive piece of commercial property in Carmel Valley.

Ironically, if the Solana Beach School District gets funding approval for a new school on Townsgate across from the Del Mar Highlands Town Center after rejecting a far less costly, and many argue more appropriate neighborhood site, they will empty the coffers for future local schools here unless a sufficient bond measure is passed soon to make up the deficit they left behind.

It is precisely this kind of funny facilities planning that sends taxpayer groups through the roof and could make the Solana Beach School District a state-wide tax and spend poster child this fall.

In Orange County, where seven school districts are attempting to pass construction bonds in the March 5 election, groups like the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association are telling voters that the proliferation of school bond measures, the result of a ballot measure that allows school construction bonds to pass with approval from just 55 percent of those voting instead of two-thirds, has made school districts less vulnerable to public scrutiny.

Here at home, the influential San Diego Taxpayer's Association formally asked the Solana Beach School District last fall to explain why their proposed school will cost twice as much as any new elementary school in the area when another less expensive site is available, announcing their interest in the outcome.

The ultimate arbiter of how much and who gets local school facility money from property taxes, builder fees and state funds is the three member North City West School Facilities Financing Authority, more warmly known as the JPA (Joint Powers Authority). One school board member from each of the three districts serving Carmel Valley, the Solana Beach, Del Mar and San Dieguito Union High School Districts, serve on the JPA.

This school funding allocation system works just fine when the funding kitty is fat. But, with only \$42.5 million available for new schools over the next several years, the Solana Beach District's initial, and likely wholly inadequate, funding request for \$31 million will make the Carmel Valley school facility kitty more anorexic than a 14-year-old Olympic gymnast.

And, because the San Dieguito High School District must have \$17 million now for a new high school to relieve the overcrowded Torrey Pines High School, and the Del Mar district needs \$20 million for their new Carmel Valley elementary school, the three people serving on the JPA will soon be forced to look more like ice skating judges than board members as two must align against a third.

The Solana Beach School District says that the alternative site between Lansdale and Del Mar Heights Road, replacing a 50 unit housing project, is unacceptable because landform challenges might delay opening the school for as long as a year.

They also insist that the 10-acre property across from the Town Center movie theaters could not be worth more than \$1.8 million an acre, a number firmly rejected by the property owner who already has approvals for development of the property.

Even in the unlikely scenario that the district could acquire the land at their price, the bill still amounts to an unseemly \$35 million, \$15 million more than a new Del Mar school in Neighborhood 8A. This is an obscene expenditure considering that 55% of California schools are over 30 years old and in serious need of repair.

Of course there is a simple and less divisive solution to the entire funding dilemma, but it would require the Solana Beach District staff to commit as much energy toward making the alternative neighborhood site work as they have in justifying the huge expenditure in a commercial center across a busy street from a food court and movie theaters.

After all, one of the most tried and true principles of the Carmel Valley Community Plan dictates that elementary schools lie within neighborhoods so children can walk to school and that the school and its adjacent park work as a neighborhood focal point. The Town Center is supposed to serve as the public focal point for the entire community.

Carmel Valley residents, whose property taxes will fill this educational Brinks Truck, and whose kids might not see another new elementary school in Carmel Valley any time soon after paying the Solana Beach School District bill, should ask the same serious questions as taxpayer groups certainly will before going along with plans to build Carmel Valley's first drive-by elementary school.