

Berkeley schools bond issue ahead

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Teachers, parents enthusiastic

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BERKELEY — Although it was too soon to shout victory, Measure A, the Berkeley Unified School District's \$158 million bond issue, was winning by a widening margin early this morning.

With the vote in 47 of 113 precincts counted, Measure A had 10,465 yes votes or 69.1 percent. There were 4,676 or 30.8 percent voting no.

The bond issue, under state law, needed approval by two-thirds of voters casting ballots yesterday.

Measure A had trailed in early returns, but surged ahead in later counting and school supporters waiting for the returns and school board member Miriam Topel's Berkeley hills home grew increasingly enthusiastic as the evening wore on.

"The crowd is growing up here," said schools superintendent LaVonea Steele. "It's still early," she said. "But we're opti-

Nearly \$100 million of the bonds would be used to tear

down and rebuild or strengthen parts of almost every school complex in the city. The balance of the money would accomplish long-deferred repairs like new electrical and plumbing systems in some of the district's quake-safe but aging buildings.

It was the first bond issue put before voters here in 27 years.

One of the problems with attempting bond issues in Berkeley is that relatively few households have children in Berkeley. According to the 1990 Census just 8,891 households here have children out of 43,453 total households.

To complicate matters, more than 2,000 of Berkeley's 10,500 potential students attend private schools.

But in exit polls in Berkeley flatslands and hills precincts yesterday most voters voiced strong support for the big bond issue and for the city's financial-

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ly strapped schools.

"I'm into education. Our kids are our future and we've got to support them," said a single woman who lives in the flatslands.

"I hope to have children one day, so I tend to support the schools," said another, younger woman, who is a flatslands renter. "I don't want to have to send my kids to private schools like my older friends do."

"I've been working on this bond issue for two or three years," said a graying Berkeley hills father and homeowner. "This is a serious proposal. Our schools need the money."

However, some Berkeley hills residents vehemently disagreed. "I've been in school construction," said one longtime hills homeowner and father. "The basic problem with those Berkeley school buildings is that they have never, never done even routine maintenance."

"They just let them deteriorate. Now they want to do it all at once."

"Not with my money," added a single hills homeowner, in his mid-40s. "I feel like all our tax dollars get wasted. I'm voting against anything that costs me money."

The bonds would be sold in phases over 10 years and would

cost the owner of the average Berkeley house, assessed at \$118,223, \$58 next year. The repayment cost for that average house would climb to a peak of \$152 in 2005, then decline to a final payment of \$6 in 2025, said Arrieta Chakos, a Berkeley parent, who is working as the school district's official liaison on the bond issue.

At this point, parts or all of four elementary schools, Arts Magnet/Whither, Columbus, Cragmont and Thousand Oaks are closed because they might collapse in an earthquake. While the buildings meet current state law for quake safety, an engineering study, based on new knowledge accumulated in recent quakes, showed those structures used nonductile concrete in their construction, which cannot take the stress of a quake.

Similar structures collapsed with spectacular and disastrous consequences in the San Fernando Valley earthquake of 1971 and the Mexico City earthquake of 1985.

Opponents maintained that such a large bond issue wasn't needed in Berkeley. Instead, they advocated a pay-as-you-go policy. They said they were counting on the fact that the bond issue needed more than 66 percent

voter approval and that many homeowners were fed up with taxes and mounting costs in every direction.

Although opponents got key endorsements from south Berkeley community activists such as Susie Gaines and Berkeley hills politicians active in the moderate All Berkeley Coalition, school officials said support for the bond issue appeared to be strong throughout the city.