

Superintendent presents Measure A timeline

By Margaret Brentano

Since the June passage of Berkeley's Measure A, which authorized the school district to raise up to \$158 million in bonds for facility rebuilding, two schools of criticism have been voiced. One is that the board and district have taken too long to come up with a plan and a decision, and the other — raised publicly mostly by the board and district — is that the community is underinformed, and that the process of change is being rushed forward without sufficient citizen involvement.

May 19, after a long school board meeting which featured both costumed performances by some of Berkeley's talented students and displays of anger by frustrated parents, the superintendent presented a new timeline for decisions about school reconfiguration which attempted to answer both sets of criticisms. To those who are frustrated she offered thanks and apologies, to those who feel rushed and uninformed she offered an elaborate new plan for public information.

Describing herself as "an educa-

tor, not a community organizer; not a politician," Steele summarized the process the district has thus far been following as that of organizing committees, setting up meetings, and "waiting for reports from

speech was not one of regret or gratitude, but a request for renewed and lengthy effort. On June 2 she is planning to suggest three "broad scenarios," involving three possible grade configurations: the current

and written information for the district. The firm, which worked on the Miles development project two years ago, was contracted by the district this spring for three months to assess, largely through interviews, the level of community knowledge of the issues raised by Measure A.

The result of their approximately 70 one-on-one interviews and the attendance at many meetings was the impression that a large proportion of the city was insufficiently informed about the options for the school's future that the site committees and task force have been discussing and that the board must choose between.

Fern Tiger, speaking for her firm said their hope is that the people who have been interviewed by her firm will link the district to sponsors for the house meetings. She believes the meetings will lead to more widespread knowledge because: "in small group setting people are more apt to ask questions that really concern them."

Tiger also said that while they are looking for house meeting sponsors in all of Berkeley, they are concentrating "especially on South and West Berkeley, where there appears to be less information."

Fern Tiger's contract will need to be renewed beyond its June expiration for the firm to complete the planned work. It is still unclear what the final cost of the ambitious public information project will be, but these expenses are now expected to be paid out of the district's general fund, not the Measure A fund.

Board President Pedro Noguera, who applauded the superintendent's speech introducing the new schedule, said, "I actually like the plan, even though I know it will frustrate some people who were expecting us to act in June."

Boardmember Miriam Topel echoed Noguera's approval in a later discussion: "This is what we need," she said.

She sympathized with those impatient with the long decision process: "I can certainly appreciate that people who have been going to meetings and meetings for months and months are frustrated." But she thinks it is most important that

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experts," in the hope that the process would be "self-generating."

"If I have not helped the process move forward... and I believe some people believe that's true... I apologize to you." She spoke of her "high regard for the work done to date by the site committees, the task force, the teachers, and especially the principals," and said, answering a frequent complaint, "I recognize and take responsibility for the fact that the time line imposed on the task force was shorter than it needed to be."

The overall tone of Steele's

model (K-3/4-6), district-wide K-5, and "a version composed of grade configurations suggested by the site committees" (the mosaic plan, with variation between schools).

On June 12, the Board will be presented with questions of design and architecture.

But the core of the Superintendent's new proposal to include a broader sweep of the population, lies in the district's plans to present the scenarios in churches, small community meetings and private homes around the city.

Steele announced: "Our goal is to host at least 60 house meetings and presentations in the late summer and fall."

The small meetings are to be followed by three large city-wide "town hall" meetings on Saturdays, which in turn will precede three public school board "round table" discussions, the final one of which should, in December, lead to a decision on how the schools will be organized in fall of 1994.

Throughout the meeting process the District will distribute information — some of it in multiple languages — and conduct surveys to increase the flow of information.

During the course of her speech, which included charts projected on an overhead screen, the Superintendent said, "I would like to make a personal appeal to members of the African American, Latino, and Asian communities... whose voices have thus far not been heard enough... to work closely with the district." Of her new schedule she said: "The process I am proposing differs from previous efforts... because it expands outreach and targets previously

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Among the information she believes the board is still missing: the cost of adding new staff to implement a possible choice plan (as recommended by the task force), and the impact of such a plan on transportation.

"We need broad community input," she said, because "choice only works if parents are interested."

While Topel is "really trying to keep (her) mind open" about the best future for Berkeley's schools, she still "really needs to be convinced that reconfiguration and choice would be better" than the current system

— or whether they would create unfairness.

Fellow board member Pamela Doolan also supported the superintendent's plan for multiple meetings, describing it as a "really hopeful way of getting involved with more people." She said "the part I find exciting is the outreach effort — that will (allow) us to get out and get to know the community."

Despite her enthusiasm for the new plan Doolan did describe the wait for information to make a final decision as "agonizing" and said the board sometimes

reminds her of a flock of penguins waiting on a cliff above icy water, none wanting to dive, until at last one

falls in and then the others follow.

Doolan stressed that the rebuilding decision is not the sole work of the board. People have an idea of the district in a state of indecision — “chaos,” she said — when, “we are, in fact, educating children and they are thriving.” She believes “whatever decision we make, it is going to work, as long as the community is behind it.”

underinvolved communities.”

Fern Tiger Associates, a firm specializing in public information, developed this plan of meetings

the board members “don’t make a hasty decision based on inadequate information.”

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