

Two views of the community center Measure A in Los Altos

Yes: A sound plan to replace an aging asset

Editor's note: The Post asked proponents and opponents of Measure A in Los Altos to write guest opinion pieces no longer than 750 words to give their arguments to voters.

BY KING LEAR

Los Altos city councils, city staff, and residents have gone through eight years of planning options on how to replace the now 66-year-old dilapidated Hillview Community Center building, and 15 years on how to replace the former city pool at Covington School. A person running a business probably views this public process with astonishment.

But we are a committee of some 28,000 people with various ideas on what we should do. Fortunately these ideas are connected by a common vision. Whether we have lived here for 50 years or recently decided to make Los Altos our home, we believe that

GUEST OPINION

Los Altos is a community, not just an address.

We believe in our schools and we volunteer and provide financial support to make them the best around.

We believe in and support our city government as it quietly keeps the city running and provides community services that bring us together at the Senior Center, or in adult education classes, or participating in youth sports and lifelong fitness programs, or enjoying our parks and library.

The project

The present city council decided unanimously in September on a plan to take to the voters. The project site is Hillview Park consisting of the existing Hillview Community Center building, the large asphalt parking lot, and the sports fields. The completed

project will include improved sports fields, a new community center with underground parking and senior center, a community pool facility that includes a warm pool for swim lessons and senior exercise programs, and landscaped areas and pathways connecting the new facilities.

The average annual cost to homeowners over the 30-year bond period is estimated to be \$19.36 per \$100,000 assessed value: less if you itemize your deductions. The assessed value can be considerably less than the present market value.

About the opponents

The opponents to Measure A include those who live across the street from the proposed project, or on nearby feeder streets. Other opponents focus more on taxes than their community. An outside political action committee has been brought in to help

fund the "no" campaign. For 63 years our city has maintained a reputation for sound financial management of its capital projects and operating budgets. This project cost has been conservatively estimated and will be properly funded by Measure A bonds supplemented with city reserves available for such projects.

City council and staff are confident in the operating budgets for the new facilities and programs based on experience and local examples of other city aquatic programs (Menlo Park). Twenty former Los Altos mayors and council members endorse Measure A, none oppose.

As you mark your ballot, what is your vision for our community, now and for future generations? Your vote could decide the outcome.

King Lear is a former mayor of Los Altos.

No: \$160 million too much for a 'concept'

BY PAT MARRIOTT

There's no doubt Los Altos needs a new community center. But without a plan, we don't know whether we'll get the Taj Mahal or the Titanic.

Too expensive

A \$65 million bond is just the tip of the iceberg. Fees and interest add \$69 million. Plus \$25 million from city reserves for parking — in spite of the budget noting "many competing demands for limited resources." Add to that over \$900,000 already spent on consultant fees.

The \$160 million total does not include furniture, equipment, moving expenses, temporary facilities during construction, operating costs or maintenance. Quoting the city finance committee: "Such expenses, potentially amounting to several million dollars, could not be paid for out of bond proceeds and would have to be met out of existing city resources."

We'll pay for every class, every meeting, every swim at a rate that can cover these expenses.

Meanwhile, our up-front "investment" would continue for 30 years, the amount depending on our home's assessed value. For tax year 2018-19, a home assessed at \$1 million would pay \$331. And that's only an estimate. Property tax varies with assessed value and bond interest. Seniors are not exempt.

GUEST OPINION

Too big

City documents describe "a framework for the proposed project" and say "once funding is secured ... the design phase can be initiated."

In fact, we won't have a design — or actual construction costs — until the city spends \$10 million to "underwrite design and engineering."

Even with the most meticulous plans, government projects are prone to exceed estimates, yet we're asked to invest in a "conceptual design" — and a rather grandiose one:

- 55,600 square feet — three times larger than existing structures — built out for classes and rental, reducing green space and recreation parkland.

- A 38,500-square-foot, three-pool aquatic center. The city council "will make a decision about the method of managing pool operations after funding is secured to construct the project."

It's inconceivable that we're asked to fund a pool complex — or anything else — without a business plan to assure us that these facilities can be self-supporting.

Wrong priorities

We're told this is a "scaled down" plan. But the price tag has gone up while important facilities have been cut.

A financial commission report says, "The 2009 Master Plan called for multiple phases of development, the first of which would include a new police station, city hall and community center, at a total estimated cost of \$81 million. Athletic fields, a library and a theater were to be included in later phases with a swim pool to be funded entirely by outside community groups."

Six years later, the asking price is \$90 million — just for a community center, with pools now financed entirely by taxpayers. There's no plan for funding facilities that dropped off the list. Will these buildings continue to deteriorate while we construct an extravagant community center? Or are there additional bonds on the horizon?

While the city spends \$25 million on parking — at \$80,000/underground space — the budget shows \$16.8 million in unfunded projects including parks, traffic calming and pedestrian/bicycle safety.

No plan

After years of costly surveys, studies and "charrettes," the city still has no clear understanding of how the community center will be used, how much it will cost to operate, how it will integrate with other parks and facilities or how it will connect to downtown.

Only in the last few weeks has the city finally taken notice of senior residents' wishes for dedicated space. A council member (stating personal views) said, "One area of legitimate need for more specificity: How do we intend to respond to the needs of seniors? The conceptual design was based, erroneously in my opinion, on the 'multigenerational' model."

Council is now scrambling to respond to a senior commission request for a 10,000-square-foot "Senior Wing," so as not to lose the senior vote. But the fact remains that the bond represents a "conceptual design" without specifics and without commitments.

Moreover, the city is planning a "visioning process" for downtown — again with high-priced consultants — which would not include any city facilities. This piecemeal planning is not in our best financial or strategic interests.

We deserve a fiscally-responsible plan for a right-sized, revitalized community center that accommodates all our community needs. Measure A is not that plan.

Get more facts at www.losaltos-neighbors.com.

Pat Marriott is a member of the Los Altos ad hoc downtown buildings committee. This column represents her personal views.

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