

July 9, 2014

Dear Editor,

I'm writing in response to the report entitled "Sources Confirm Cerritos Mayor Pro-Tem Carol Chen Held Meeting to Stop Passage of ABCUSD Bond Measure" that appeared in your newspaper yesterday. I was in attendance of the meeting the report was referring to, and as an eyewitness I would like to point out that the report is quite inaccurate.

I first learned about this meeting on June 30 through an email message from Carol Chen that says, in part:

"I am calling an urgent meeting to seek your input on the proposed ABCUSD \$680 Million Facilities Plan and \$235 Million Bond Measure the Board of Education will be voting on at the July 8th Board meeting.

"Given the facts I know of current, if the Bond passes, it Will impact/increase your property tax bill hundreds of dollars annually. ABC School Board Members, Lynda Johnson and Soo Yoo both have reached out to me to get this information out to the public."

I had been busy with family business and not involved with public affairs for quite some time. However, because of the gravity of this matter, I decided to attend the meeting. As Grace Hu had been helping me buy a house in Norwalk for my mother, I told her about the meeting and urged her to attend it. I later learned that she was almost denied entrance because she did not send in an RSVP.

Carol started the meeting emphasizing it was a private gathering of friends and concerned members of the community. Lynda and Soo then read a letter from their legal counsel regarding what they could and could not say. The duo proceeded with sharing what was public information about the proposed master plan and bond measure. They stressed that they were there just to listen, and they shared no opinion of their own.

I was at the meeting the whole time and I can assure you there was absolutely no mention of "hard ball politics and strategy on how to defeat the bond measure" at the meeting, as one of your sources alleged.

Throughout the meeting, Grace just listened and took notes but never said a word. Carol and a number of other community members and/or former elected officials did share their thoughts and concerns about the subject matter. The meeting ended with Carol encouraging everyone to attend the school board meetings on July 8 and 15, just to be informed and share their thoughts.

Personally, I did not see any ill intent from anyone at the meeting. What I saw was an earnest attempt to inform community members and hear their opinions about a major public project proposal by a few elected officials in a private setting. It was regrettable that some community members were turned away from the meeting, though I could understand why: the meeting venue was a tiny office that was packed. Chairs were brought in from outside but there were not enough of them so some attendants remained standing.

Frankly, I wish the meeting on Wednesday was not a private gathering called by a few individuals, but an official public hearing called by the entire ABC school board. Whether the law of our land requires such a hearing, the public and especially the home owners in our school district have the right to know about something that will impact their life in a significant way.

I moved to Cerritos 16 years ago because of the excellent schools in the ABC school district. Two of my children graduated from ABC schools. Naturally I support the concept of investing in our schools. The question is how much investment we need and how much of it can we afford.

For many years, we've been told by the school district that our school enrollment has been on a steady decline. If that is true, then what exactly is the current level of Average Daily Attendance (ADA)? What percentage of it actually lives within the borders of the ABC school district? What is the projection of the number of school age children over the next 10 to 15 years? Based on these statistics, how much school facility renovation do we actually need? Are there possible school closures in the forecast as a result of the perceived school enrollment decline? If so, should the master plan remain the same or should there be some adjustments accordingly?

On the other hand, there is little doubt the population in our school district is getting old. Many people now live on their social security or 401K or other types of fixed income. How much additional property tax can they afford? There was already a \$59 million bond measure in 1997 for school facility modernization, which home owners of our school district are still paying off through their property taxes. Now we want to add another one 4 times as large. Is that realistic? Home prices in our district are already sky-high, making it difficult for young couples to move in and settle down. An increase in property taxes could make it even more so, which in turn could make the enrollment decline even worse. That would be bad news for the future of our school district.

Finally, there is the issue of transparency and accountability. When Ms Cecy Groom was on the school board, she kept complaining about the lack of transparency about the procurement process and possible misappropriation of the \$150 million school modernization funds, and she complained about the actual result of improvements made not matching the amount of money spent. Now, over ten years later, will there be a repeat of what happened back then? What mechanisms are in place to assure taxpayers their hard-earned tax dollars will be put to good use? Homeowners and taxpayers of our school district deserve to be informed.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Ao

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