

EDITORIALS

Now, for the questions

What did school officials know — and when?

Now that Measure B has failed at the polls, we think voters should demand answers to a familiar and damning political question: What did district officials know and when did they know it?

The board's reluctance to reveal financial information the public was entitled to have fueled suspicions that the district had something to hide, and contributed to the bond issue's defeat.

Let's look at the financial story as revealed by the district's files.

Before deciding to place Measure B on the ballot, the district commissioned ATI Engineering Services, Inc., to estimate the costs of construction projects.

ATI's report on Project No. S3107 is dated Oct. 26, 1994. It contains, in spreadsheet format, details of how cost estimates for each district campus were arrived at. For example, at Alamo Elementary School, the estimate for repaving is based on 35,000 square feet (Column A), at a unit cost of \$2.15 (Column B) for a total cost of \$75,300 (Column AxB).

The cost of all Alamo projects was \$2,195,400. ATI added 10 percent for contingencies and \$148,000 for design fees, for a total of \$2,583,000. Similar calculations for all 26 school resulted in the well publicized — and much criticized — total of \$81.3 million and the \$82 million in bonds that Measure B would have authorized.

But the trustees did not provide any detailed information, leaving themselves open to accusations, by former board members Ernie Scherer and Jo Anne Erickson among others, that the totals were simply padded.

By January, opponents' charges were having an effect, and the Times was pressing the district for more information. But officials did not give the press the Oct. 26 report. Instead, they released a revision, dated Jan. 10, which omitted the crucial cost information (Columns B and AxB).

That's clearly a violation of state law guaranteeing public access to public records. What's not so clear is who should be held responsible. Superintendent Bieke Vos and Board Chairman Chris Kenber say they had not seen the detailed figures, and didn't need to see them to decide whether to place Measure B on the ballot.

What did the trustees see before they sent Measure B to the voters? Who did see the October report? Who ordered that it be revised before it was distributed to the public in January?

Similar questions must be raised about the method of financing. At a lengthy meeting with Times editors Feb. 15, the district presented a detailed analysis of its deferred-interest option, prepared for the newspaper by Altura Nelson & Company, the district's underwriter.

The presentation relied heavily on the assertion that the assumption of 4.65 percent annual growth was "very conservative."

But a special report wasn't what the newspaper had asked for: We wanted to see the information the school board had used to make its decision, and we backed it up with a written request citing the state's freedom-of-information law.

Vos and Kenber agreed that the press and the public were entitled to the information we had asked for, even to the extent of going through the file drawers in the district office. Reporter Susan Dowdney did just that, and that's where she found the October surprise.

She also discovered that the district's earlier projections of growth were based on lower rates of 3 or 4 percent. Again, we want to know who decided on the 4.65 percent rate, and why. The actual rate for 1994-95 was only 2.86 percent, and if that low rate were to continue, Measure B taxes would be higher than the current levy, contrary to the board's pre-election promises.

Concealing information from the public is a serious breach of officials' responsibility. We demand an answer: What did they know, and when did they know it?