

March 21, 2007

To: Members of the Board

From: Tom Bishop

Subject: Article of Interest

Attached is the following article of interest:

11.1 *“Don’t Subvert Local Voters by Using School Funds for Rural Fire Protection”*,
by Randy Ward, San Diego County Superintendent of Schools

RECOMMENDED: For Information Only.

11.1

Don't Subvert Local Voters by Using School Funds for Rural Fire Protection

By Randolph E. Ward
San Diego County Superintendent of Schools

Anyone in San Diego County in the fall of 2003 has powerful memories of the Cedar and Paradise wildfires. Sixteen people were killed, and more than 400,000 acres were burned. I was working in Oakland at the time, but even from that distance I was aware of the devastation of the fires.

The wildfires drew attention to the shortage of fire protection services in much of rural San Diego County. The issue had been raised previously, but never had the region's vulnerability been exposed so vividly.

To their credit, several local agencies, spearheaded by County Supervisor Dianne Jacob among others, have refused to let the issue fade. Plans to merge the multiple, rural fire protection agencies into a single force with enhanced services have been drafted, and proposed state legislation is expected soon.

Unfortunately, Supervisor Jacob's well-intended initiative targets cash-strapped local schools to pay for the enhanced firefighting services. With all due respect, legislation re-directing tax dollars from school classrooms to rural fire protection would be seriously misguided.

Here are a few of the reasons:

--- Prop. 172, approved by California voters in 1993, enacted a half-cent sales tax to pay specifically for such public safety needs. It was placed on the ballot to insure that public safety needs would be met, without compromising other vital public services.

--- Local voters have repeatedly shown their support for adequate school funding, and funds approved by voters for schools should stay with schools. If voters want to approve more tax dollars for fire protection, they should be given that choice.

--- Prop. 98, the complex school funding measure approved by voters in 1988, makes schools dependent on local property tax revenues under certain circumstances. Both the state Department of Finance and Legislative Analyst project those circumstances to be present within a very short time.

Supervisor Jacob has pointed out that other counties in the state do not provide the level of support for their schools that San Diego County residents provide. While true, I have yet to hear anyone say, "We need to cut school programs so we're not spending more than anyone else."

In fact, as I travel throughout San Diego County to familiarize myself with our 42 local school districts and their distinct communities, I have heard a recurring theme: Please help us generate more resources for our teachers and classrooms.

Local residents are justifiably proud of their San Diego County public schools. Our schools are preparing more students for higher education, with far more advanced academic skills, than ever before.

Thanks to our schools, students confronted by extreme social and economic challenges are getting the very best chance they will ever have of lifting up their lives and becoming productive citizens. I have been your San Diego County Superintendent less

than eight months, but I am in awe of the life-changing work I have already seen in our local schools.

Supervisor Jacob is to be commended for her steadfast effort to provide improved fire protection for rural San Diego County. As a former teacher and school board member, she knows the importance of adequate school funding. However, in this instance she is taking a position that will be strongly opposed by school boards and other educational organizations throughout San Diego County.

We hope that an alternative plan to fund rural fire protection services can be devised. I look forward to working with Supervisor Jacob to find such a solution, one that has the support of our entire community.