Fountaingrove Fire Station Debacle Continues
(Santa Rosa Officials in No Hurry to Seek Reimbursement)

It has been 18 months since the April 2015 opening of the new Santa Rosa fire station in Fountaingrove was delayed because of design flaws that rendered the newly completed building noncompliant with ADA accessibility requirements. Kitchens, bathrooms and doorways of the brand new building had to be torn out and rebuilt at a cost of nearly $200,000 plus an as yet undisclosed amount of staff time.

SoCoTax is concerned that the parties responsible for the design flaws are architects or others having a perhaps too cozy relationship with Santa Rosa councilmembers.

Santa Rosa Seeks Extension of Expiring Sales Tax
(SoCoTax Urges Residents Vote No on Measure N)

Santa Rosa residents are being asked to continue for another 8 years the temporary sales tax increase first approved by voters in 2010 and commonly known as Measure P (its 2010 ballot designation). Renamed for the November, 2016 election as Measure N, the measure was put on the ballot by the Santa Rosa city council.

Back in 2010, and in the midst of the recession, Santa Rosa’s city council asked voters for a tax increase to help the city weather the storm. Supporters of the increase argued in their 2010 ballot argument that the tax was necessary as the city faced budget deficits.

Supes Seek New Tax for Parks
(Measure J Ignores Excess Pension Problem)

One must certainly admire the tenacity of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. Undaunted by last year’s stinging defeat of Measure A (the general tax masquerading as a “roads tax”) rejected by voters at a 2 to 1 rate, the Supes have returned this year with Measure J, a sales tax increase that would raise $9.5 million in new taxes annually to augment current parks funding. Actually, Measure J is just one of three proposed tax increases the Supes are promoting this year along with Measures L and Y (for libraries.

SoCoTax is concerned that the parties responsible for the design flaws are architects or others having a perhaps too cozy relationship with Santa Rosa councilmembers.

Turn to Fire Station Debacle, page 11

Turn to Extension of Expiring Sales Tax, page 13

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Sonoma County Taxpayers’ Association

We, the members of SCTA are concerned not only with the County’s measures to raise revenue, but also with the County’s decisions to spend revenue. One particular spending issue has arisen which has me deeply concerned about the judgment of the County supervisors. The issue is whether the supervisors should provide financial assistance to meet the current needs of the County Law Library. This is not a matter of budgetary priorities. It is a question of whether the people of this County will continue to be afforded a fundamental right. But the supervisors are reportedly divided on this issue.

The rules governing county law libraries in California are found in the Business and Professions Code sections 6300 to 6364. The original statute was enacted in 1891. It mandated the creation of law libraries in every county. Code section 6360 provides that: “A law library established under this chapter shall be free to the judiciary, to state and county officials, to members of the State Bar, and to all residents of the county, for the examination of books and other publications at the library or its branches.” So the people of this County have a statutory right to a law library, and the County government has a corresponding duty to afford the people that right.

Beyond statutory law, natural law mandates that the people be provided with a law library. If the People have a duty to abide by the law, they must necessarily have the right to know or to learn what the law requires. Two thousand years ago, Emperor Hammurabi of Babylon saw the need to write the laws of his empire on clay tablets, and to post them publicly so that all his subjects could know what behavior was expected of them. Our society is far more complex than was ancient Babylon. But the right of the governed to be informed of the law remains the same. Both our federal and state constitutions guarantee “due process of law.” The courts have interpreted that phrase to mean, among other things, that every person has the right to fair notice of the rules of our society. The law library is what gives the people direct and complete access to those rules.

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recently made these findings: The Law Library serves approximately 250 patrons each week. 75 percent of the patrons are non-attorneys, most of whom cannot afford attorney fees. In fiscal year 2014-2015, the expenses of the Sonoma County Law Library totaled $379,134. Historically, the law library has been funded from filing fees paid by litigants in civil matters. The fee for filing a lawsuit is $435, of which $35 is designated by statute for the law library. But for various reasons, court filing fees have declined in recent years leaving the law library under-funded. Business and Professions Code section 6324 does provide: “The Board of Supervisors may appropriate from the county treasury for law library purposes such sums as may in their discretion appear proper.”

Sonoma County is collecting over $800 million per year in property taxes alone. I understand that the supervisors are presented with many demands to pay for public employee pensions, low income housing, road repair, benefits for veterans, students, the elderly, on and on. The supervisors have to make some tough budgetary decisions. But the fundamental nature of the right of the people to a law library should not be compromised. I urge all SCTA members to write to their respective supervisors demanding that the County law library be adequately funded.
Property tax revenues indeed declined during the recession, which necessarily reduced the libraries’ funding. Commissioners responded to these reductions by cutting operating hours, a situation they would now seek to reverse. What the Commissioners are not saying, however, is that their revenues have rebounded as the economy recovers from the recession. In fact, property tax revenues now exceed pre-recessionary levels. Yet library hours have not been restored, which begs the question, why? Quite simply, and as mentioned above, the Commissioners have elected to spend their money for other purposes.

Rather than restoring branch hours, the Library Commission handed out raises to its staff. Those raises were based on a defective salary survey of other library systems that examined salary only while ignoring other compensation components such as pension and health care benefits. Whether Sonoma County library staff are compensated comparatively to other library systems is simply not known since Commissioners sought to focus on only one aspect of the entire compensation package. Still, raises were given to library staff whose salaries were below the norm as determined by the survey. Staff with salaries above the norm were not given raises, but neither were their salaries trimmed to bring them in line with the survey. That one-sided approach to things results in total salaries above the norm.

In addition to the raises, Commissioners created new positions such as a new public outreach director and administrative aides. They also hired consultants whose primary assignment was to market this very tax proposal. Rather than restoring hours, Commissioners found it more important to hire additional staff to sell the idea of a tax increase to voters.

In order to be fair, it should be noted that not all of the money was wasted on unnecessary new hires. Commissioners also made some worthwhile investments to upgrade IT systems as well as open the new Roseland branch. Still, and even though they claim it to be their priority, they did not restore operating hours.

Commissioners like to argue also that neighboring counties spend 2.5 to 3 times more per person on their libraries than does Sonoma County. That may be technically true, but is also misleading. It falsely assumes the library systems compared have similar expenses, which is not necessarily the case. The Sonoma County Library system is a joint powers authority (in effect, a partnership) of the county and its nine incorporated cities. Each of those partners provide the buildings and grounds upon which the libraries operate. No rent is paid by the library system for those facilities, which keeps down expenses thereby reducing the per capita figures. It also skews comparisons to other libraries. A meaningful comparison would have included the expenses borne by the county and cities for the ownership and maintenance of these facilities.

No one disputes the value libraries bring to the community. The problem is that the current library administration has pursued misguided priorities that leave it unable to deliver the services we expect. For that reason, SoCoTax urges a No vote on Measure Y.

L Stands for Lazy

(Contributed by Tim Hannan)

The County Board of Supervisors has put another tax proposal on the November ballot. This one is called Measure L. This measure would increase the transient occupancy tax (“TOT”), i.e. the tax on tourists and other guests staying in hotels and motels. The room rate would be increased from 9% to 12%, and would raise an estimated $4 million annually in revenue. The supervisors argue that this tax increase is justified because tourists put a burden on County roads and emergency services, and at the 9% rate the tourists are not paying “their fair share.”

But the supervisors offer no evidence, no findings, no metrics on which to base their conclusion that tourists are not paying their fair share. Nor do the supervisors address the question: How much more of a financial strain can the County impose on tourists before they begin to say “Let’s go somewhere else”?

It’s easy to understand the supervisors’ thinking in proposing Measure L: “Let’s just increase taxes on people who do not live or vote here in our County. They are powerless to oppose this tax increase.” The supervisors must be savoring the prospect of such easy money relieving to some degree the demands...
Sonoma County Taxpayers’ Association

on the County budget. But all the while, the supervisors are not doing the work they need to do in order to meet what is by far the biggest budgetary challenge facing them, and that is the public employee pension problem.

One year ago, the Independent Citizens Advisory Committee on Pension Matters was formed to examine the pension problem. The Committee noted: “The total annual cost of employee pension is approximately 36% of (the County’s) payroll, and career employees can take home more in pension and Social Security benefits when retired than they took home while working.” Meanwhile, the ever-increasing burden of County employee pensions continues to eat into funds needed for such essentials as road repair and public safety. In its thorough and intelligent 95-page report, the Committee recommended specific actions for the supervisors to take. The supervisors need to define an appropriate level of retirement benefits, define the County’s level of sustainable pension costs, negotiate with employees’ unions to have employees contribute to their pension plans, establish an annual reporting process to inform the public of progress toward pension reform, and join in a lobbying effort to change state law to allow a new tier of employees with whom the County can negotiate new terms of employment. That’s a lot of work for the supervisors, but it’s work they must do. As the Committee noted, what is needed at the Board of Supervisors is “a higher sense of urgency in pension reform efforts to reduce costs, free resources, and reduce risk.” Measure L and other general tax proposals would only reduce that needed sense of urgency.

Just for Fun #1. Which California governor was the first – and last – to use a state-owned aircraft for his travels, similar to the president’s use of Air Force One? Bonus question – Can you name the Hollywood celebrity who previously owned the plane?

Measure O Seeks to Correct Deficiencies to Public Safety Funding
(2016’s Measure O Amends 2004 Version)

Santa Rosa’s Measure O is a necessary amendment of the original Measure O first adopted by voters in 2004. The original 2004 measure adopted a sales tax increase to provide additional funding for police, fire and gang prevention. In order to make sure the new taxes provided truly additional funding and did not simply replace existing funding, the measure required that police and fire budgets be maintained at their 2004 levels or higher. So far, so good.

Unfortunately, the mechanism for maintaining 2004 levels was set as a fixed dollar amount and not as a percentage, which proved to be a real hardship during the recession when the overall city budget was reduced as tax revenues declined. In order to maintain 2004 funding levels for police and fire, all other city departments had to make up the shortfall. The original measure does contain a provision allowing the council to override the minimum police and fire funding levels, but doing so requires six votes of the seven-member council. This measure seeks to correct the funding imbalance by setting funding levels based on percentages, not dollar amounts. Unfortunately, and as further evidence of the strength the police and fire unions bring to the table, the new percentage is based on the 2015-2016 budget, which is higher than it was in 2004. Such an increase is the price exacted by the police and fire unions in exchange for their support.

To help understand how this works, consider this example under the original measure as currently in effect. Your total city budget is $100 million of which $60 million (or 60%) goes to police and fire and $40 million (or 40%) goes to everything else. If revenues decline 10% to $90 million, police and fire would stay at $60 million while funding for everything else dips to $30 million (a 25% reduction in funding for streets, parks, water, etc.).

Under the amended measure where minimum police and fire funding is expressed as a percentage, and using the same scenario as above, all city departments, including police and fire, would experience a more modest 10% reduction in funding.
Recessionary cuts are not pleasant of course, but this amendment spreads the pain more evenly without resulting in draconian cuts to anyone. Notwithstanding the funding increase from 2004 to 2016 levels, a political compromise that speaks to the unhealthy influence brought by the police and fire unions, SoCoTax recommends a Yes vote on Measure O.

City of Sonoma Seeks Extension of 2012 Tax
(Another Temporary Tax That Isn’t)

In another case of a local government seeking to renew a tax originally sold to its residents as a short-term, stop-gap necessity, Measure U is the City of Sonoma’s attempt to extend its 2012 half-cent sales tax beyond its scheduled 2017 expiration. The tax generates $2.2 million annually and as with their colleagues in Santa Rosa and other cities, the Sonoma city council wants to hang on to it.

In 2012, the Sonoma city council asked voters for a temporary, five-year sales tax increase to help the city weather the recession as well as adjust to the loss of its redevelopment agency. It was a time of economic uncertainty and the city had been forced to slash its budget eliminating or reducing many vital community services and programs.

But four years later, things are different. The economy is rebounding; sales, property and hotel taxes are on the rise; city revenues now exceed pre-recessionary levels. The newly formed Tourism Improvement District has not only increased tourism revenues by 10-12%, but also absorbs the cost of tourism-related expenses such as Plaza lighting, marketing costs and special events funding thus relieving the city of those expenses. The needs that justified the 2012 increase are gone.

As revenues rebounded, the council got busy spending its money on new pet programs. One of which, the Community Fund Grant Program, even used some of its money to fund out-of-town non-profits with local tax revenues. Further, the city council created and filled new positions within the city that did not previously exist.

Making matters worse, this tax is a general purpose tax meaning any new revenues can be spent for any purpose the current or future city councils decide. Promises that the funds will be used for police, fire and emergency medical services, street maintenance, parks or any other purpose are meaningless, as evidently was their promise back in 2012 that the tax would be temporary.

Elected officials frequently lament that they are held in low esteem and untrusted by their constituents. One needs look no further than the broken promises of 2012 that this was only a temporary tax to understand citizens’ reservations. SoCoTax believes elected officials should be held accountable for the promises they make. We urge a No vote on Measure U.
Just for Fun #2. In February 1969, then Assemblyman Leo Ryan of San Mateo County proposed establishing a __________ in the basement of the Capitol for use by legislators. Fill in the blank.

Sonoma Clean Power Update

Sonoma Clean Power (SCP) continues to ride a powerful wave of financial success due to favorable wholesale market power costs. With customer rates set below those of PG&E, including PG&E’s questionable “leaving the system penalty,” profits have been a substantial $27.3 million for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2016. Even with profits initially used to pay down debts and establish reserves, there is considerable money available for greenhouse gas (GHG) reducing programs beyond a number of smaller subsidy initiatives already in place.

A powerful GHG reduction opportunity is the replacement of petrol-based cars with electric vehicles. This is expensive, however, as it involves direct financial subsidies. SCP is considering a program to add a further subsidy onto existing federal and state subsidies for electric car purchases such that the price to an average SCP customer for a $31,000 vehicle would be reduced by about 67%, about 75% for low income purchasers. An additional subsidy would be available for home charging stations. A total cost cap of $1.4 million is being considered, thought to be enough to provide for 380 electric vehicles.

Details are still being worked out as the program would include a leasing option and cover several models/vendors making the entire program rather complex. Having a total cost cap for one-time expenditures is important to protect ratepayers from being locked into paying higher rates for big program commitments if overall SCP profitability declines.

The expansion of SCP as the power provider for Mendocino County and cities (except Ukiah which has its own municipal system) is close to conclusion. Questions about county and
city representation on the SCP Board remain. The financial impact is not well defined, but should be small. The social/ environmental benefits to Mendocino are there, but costs of diluting and complicating SCP management and staff efforts are more difficult to predict.

The favorable financial climate continues, but ratepayers should hope that management and the Board remember that energy is a cyclical business and a relaxed fiscal culture does not develop making it difficult to operate in a tight and shrinking profit environment.

(Written and contributed by R G Williamson. Williamson is a member of the Ratepayer Advisory Committee for Sonoma Clean Power. The author notes that all opinions expressed in this article are his own and do not reflect positions of SCP or its Board of Directors.)

(Just for Fun #3. In the early 1990s, a sales tax levied by what California county was declared illegal by the state Supreme Court, prompting a two-year process in which officials debated how to refund the illegal tax? Bonus question: How was the refund accomplished?)

Public Employee Pension Funds Falling Short
Reprinted from CalTaxNewsletter, July 29, 2016

Trusted with $188.7 billion of retirement funds and other benefits for California’s teachers, the California State Teachers’ Retirement System (CalSTRS) has fallen short of this year’s investment expectations. With a target of 7.5 percent growth in the value of its investment portfolio, CalSTRS reported just 1.4 percent growth – far less than even the growth of the economy.

Meanwhile, the California Public Employees’ Retirement System (CalPERS), the nation’s largest pension trust fund, reported this month that its investment earnings for 2015-16 were just 0.61 percent. A 3.4 percent loss in stocks, which make up 52 percent of the CalPERS portfolio, was cited as the main problem.

“Over the last two years of earning just a fraction of the assumed 7.5 percent ‘discount rate,’ CalPERS has fallen behind its assumptions by $30-plus billion,” columnist Dan Walters wrote in The Sacramento Bee. “Thus, the entire trust fund has shrunk in relative terms because ‘contributions’ by state and local governments and their employees fall well short of pension payouts and the earnings needed to bridge the gap haven’t been there.

With the fund stuck at around $300 billion for two years, it’s about $100 billion short of fully funding its pension obligations, and falling shorter each day. And that shortfall is based on its 7.5 percent discount rate, even though the average return has been under that mark for decades.”

CalSTRS investments have averaged 7.7 percent returns over the past five years, and somewhat lower, at 7 percent, over the last 20 years. Gains of 11.1 percent in real estate and 5.7 percent on bonds were dramatically counterbalanced by a 2.3 percent loss in public stock.
Chief Investment Officer Christopher Ailman blamed the year-long lackluster performance on the global impact of the “Brexit” vote for Britain to leave the European Union. (CalTax: The New York Stock Exchange has grown more than 2 percent in the past year, and more than 11 percent in the last five years, according to the S&P 500. Wall Street experienced nine consecutive days of gains just weeks after the Brexit vote – the first such streak since 2013.)

Spurred on by climate talks in Paris earlier this year, CalSTRS is planning to invest $2.5 billion in low-carbon investments.

November Ballot Recommendations

The November 2016 ballot is a crowded one with candidates for everything from president of the United States to the board of trustees of your local school district. There are 17 California state measures for voters to ponder as well as 23 measures put forward by Sonoma County cities, school districts, the library commission and the county itself.

We here at SoCoTax rely on our volunteers to narrow down the field and determine what measures deserve our attention. We research and review the history of the governing body sponsoring the measure and the background behind the measure. We evaluate the measure by asking if it and the sponsoring body behind it promote the effective and efficient use of taxpayer resources. And finally, we take a position to support or oppose the measure. In many cases, we prepare the official ballot arguments appearing in the voter information guide mailed to every voter in the county.

Sometimes there are more measures than we have volunteers. That means of course that some measures deserving our scrutiny don’t get it. We are always looking for volunteers to help with this most important task so if you are objective, have good analytical and writing skills, and would like to lend a hand, please let us know.

Of this year’s 23 county measures, we evaluated and took positions on seven. We were unable to evaluate the many school bonds and parcel taxes on the ballot, which is indeed unfortunate as these measures deserve thorough review. Our experience with school bonds in particular is that most school districts fail to set aside any reserves to pay for facilities maintenance. Roofs, HVAC systems, plumbing and electrical systems, parking lots, etc. all have predictable useful lives after which they will need replacement or repair. The prudent approach to these known future expenses is to every year set aside funds in a reserve account so that monies are available to pay for these expensive items when the time comes. Relying on debt instruments such as bonds to pay for these maintenance items is a poor business practice. We have also discovered an unsettling trend among many school districts to use long term bond funds (25-40 year repayment periods, typi-
cally) to pay for iPads, laptop computers, and other electronic equipment having short useful lives. This mismatching of repayment periods to useful lives means that the debt incurred to purchase such equipment continues to be repaid many years and oftentimes decades after the equipment is exhausted. For readers’ interest, we have listed below all 23 county measures. Which measures appearing on your particular ballot depends of course on where you live. Next to those measures we have evaluated is our recommendation.

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<th>Measure name and description</th>
<th>SCTA Position</th>
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<td>1. Measure C – Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified School District, $240,000,000 bond</td>
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<td>2. Measure D – Healdsburg School District, $67,000,000 bond</td>
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<td>3. Measure E – Sonoma Valley Unified School District, $120,000,000 bond</td>
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<td>4. Measure F – Windsor Unified School District, $62,000,000 bond</td>
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<td>5. Measure G – Guerneville School District, $7,000,000 bond</td>
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<td>6. Measure H – Rincon Valley Unified School District Special Parcel Tax Renewal and Increase, $99/parcel ($96 existing tax plus $3 increase)</td>
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<td>7. Measure I – Wilmar Unified School District Special Parcel Tax, $75/parcel</td>
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<td>8. Measure J – Sonoma County Regional Parks and Water Improvement Special Sales Tax, ½% for 10 years</td>
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<td>9. Measure K – Sonoma County Community Separators Ordinance</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<td>10. Measure L – Sonoma County Transit Occupancy Tax, 3% increase (from 9% to 12%)</td>
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<td>11. Measure M – Sonoma County Transgenic Contamination Prevention Ordinance</td>
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<td>12. Measure N – City of Santa Rosa Sales Tax Extension, ¼% for eight years</td>
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<td>13. Measure O – City of Santa Rosa Public Safety Spending Levels</td>
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<td>14. Measure P – Cloverdale Cannabis Business Tax</td>
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<td>15. Measure Q – City of Cotati Urban Growth Boundary</td>
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<td>17. Measure S – City of Healdsburg Transit Occupancy Tax, 2% increase (from 12% to 14%)</td>
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<td>18. Measure T – City of Healdsburg Fluoridation of Water Supply</td>
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<td>19. Measure U – City of Sonoma Sales Tax Extension, ½% for 5 years</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<td>20. Measure V – City of Sonoma Leaf Blower Regulations</td>
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<td>21. Measure W – City of Sonoma Smoking and Tobacco Regulations</td>
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<td>22. Measure X – Waugh School District, $4,000,000 bond</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. Measure Y – Sonoma County Library Special Sales Tax, 1/8% for 10 years</td>
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Annual advertising rates (quarterly publication) for 2017 as follows:

- Full page ........................................ $650
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For quarter, half and full page ads, send your check as above and e-mail a .pdf file of your ad to taxpayer@sonic.net.
Monthly Meetings

Association meetings are held the third Thursday of the month at the Fountaingrove Inn in Santa Rosa. Members and guests are encouraged to attend. Meetings start at noon and adjourn by 1:30 p.m. Cost is $25 for members with prepaid advance reservations ($30 for all others). Our Annual General Meeting in February is in lieu of our regular luncheon meeting and we are dark in December. Email taxpayer@sonic.net or call 481-1089 for reservations.

Upcoming Speakers:

October 20, 2016  Jerry Threet, Sonoma County Independent Office of Law Enforcement Review and Outreach

November 17, 2016  Jack Atkin, Independent Citizens Pension Advisory Committee

December 15, 2016  No meeting

Our Distribution

The Watchful Eye is produced quarterly and mailed to all of our members and most elected officials throughout Sonoma County. We also send approximately 1,200 electronic versions to those who have subscribed to our e-distribution list. The feedback we receive, both positive and negative, confirms our reach and that your message is heard. The costs of producing a quality publication are substantial and we rely on our dues-paying members and advertisers to ensure our continued success. To both our members and advertisers, we say thank you. If you are not a member or advertiser, please consider becoming one. Together we can make a difference.

Do We Have Your Email Address?

If you haven’t been receiving our email notices of meetings and other events, it’s probably because we don’t have your current email address. To be included on our distribution list, send us an email to taxpayer@sonic.net and let us know.

Just For Fun #4. How many times does the word “tax,” or any variation, appear in the Declaration of Independence?
Fire Station Debacle, continued from page 1

bers. Our concern grows ever greater as the months add up with no apparent effort having been made by councilmembers to recoup from the responsible parties the city’s losses.

Architects and other design professionals are active in local politics often backing school bonds and other measures that offer substantial employment opportunities. They are also frequent contributors to the campaigns of local councilmembers they consider friendly to their professional interests. That Santa Rosa councilmembers have appeared for the past year and a half content to brush this issue aside while taxpayers are left holding the tab is not only troubling, but hints of cronyism and corruption.

Three months ago, city manager Sean McGlynn told us that his office continued to investigate the matter as did the city attorney’s office. As this newsletter goes to press, we again called McGlynn for an update. McGlynn told us that his office continues to “work really hard to address many of the concerns [we] raised” and that our concerns had been “fully communicated” to councilmembers and that they were “going through a process” the results of which he would share with us at the end. McGlynn added that they were very concerned about accountability, that projects run smoothly and that the public can trust them with the resources they’re privileged to manage.

McGlynn’s assurances aside, we find it increasingly difficult to find a plausible explanation for councilmembers’ inaction short of concluding that their loyalty to campaign supporters outweighs their loyalty to the residents of Santa Rosa. These same councilmembers have unanimously put forward on the November ballot Measure N, (a sales tax measure discussed elsewhere in this newsletter) that asks us to entrust them with millions of dollars in new tax revenues. How are voters to reconcile these two actions?

Supes Seek New Tax for Parks, continued from page 1

and tourists). Yes, their tenacity must certainly be admired even if their political acumen is in doubt.

Measure J contains a few new wrinkles. Unlike Measure A, Measure J is a special purpose tax with the funds specifically earmarked for a host of new parks-related projects (biking and hiking trails, new park lands, etc.) so we can at least tip our cap to the Supes for abandoning the general purpose tax philosophy of Measure A. Unfortunately, this tax applies only to businesses in the unincorporated areas of the county. The Supes apparently have no qualms about saddling the county’s rural residents and businesses with the burden of paying for a resource enjoyed as much or more by city residents than county residents. That the Supes seem to think rural residents should pay for the county’s parks while city residents get a free pass is simply unconscionable.

Measures J, L and Y, as well as last year’s Measure A, are all made necessary because of the county’s inability to curb its pension costs. The Independent Citizens Pension Advisory Committee, made up of independent county residents appointed by the Board of Supervisors to evaluate the county’s pension reform efforts to date, recently reported that the county spent $269 million in excess pension costs over the past ten years. That’s nearly $27 million a year that should have gone to our parks, libraries and roads. Moreover, the Advisory Committee reports that number will grow to $741 million by 2030 (see chart on page 12).

Somewhat counterintuitively, and certainly contrary to what Measure J supporters will tell you, parks funding has actually grown over the years. Parks funding has increased from $8.2 million in 2003 to $14 million last year. The $9.5 million Measure J is expected to raise thus constitutes a whopping 68% increase over current funding levels.

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Sonoma County Taxpayers’ Association
Fortunately for all of us, there is a better way to supplement parks funding without raising new taxes. All Sonoma County residents (not just those in the unincorporated areas) currently pay sales tax for the Agricultural and Open Space Preservation District. The Open Space District uses most of its money to buy fee interests and conservation easements on select lands the rural character of which is sought to be preserved. Unfortunately, the public has little access to these lands notwithstanding the use of public money for their acquisition. As currently constituted, only 10% of the funds raised through the Open Space District tax is used for parks and public access. Rather than asking the county’s unincorporated residents to bear alone 100% of a new tax, the Supes can and should submit to all of the voters in the county an amendment to the open space tax increasing the allocation of tax monies to park uses.

Our opposition to Measure J is not about parks. We all love and enjoy our public parks. Rather, our opposition is rooted in the county’s continuing refusal to deal with its pension, health care and compensation issues. Rather than recovering the $27 million that has been lost annually to excess pension benefits or amending the Open Space District tax to make the district more responsive to public needs for greater park access, the Supes seek to levy a greater tax burden on its rural residents only. We cannot support such misguided priorities. Indeed, no one can. SoCoTax urges a No vote on Measure J.
its “most serious fiscal crisis” due to the “severe recession.” Without the increase, the supporters continued, residents would experience fire station brownouts, police force reductions, and park closures. The Finley Swim Center was said to be on the “chopping block.” It was a time of economic hardship and voters responded by approving the temporary tax increase.

But now, six years later, things are different. The fiscal crisis has passed. So too has the severe recession. The economy is rebounding with sales, property and hotel taxes all on the rise. City revenues now exceed pre-recessionary levels. In a nutshell, the needs that justified a temporary tax increase in 2010 are gone. Yet, and as further evidence of the old maxim that no tax is temporary, the Santa Rosa city council wants voters to continue the recession-era tax even though the recession is behind us.

Making matters worse, the tax is a general purpose tax meaning all funds raised go directly into the city’s general fund where they can be used for any purpose the current or future city councils decide. The current city council promises that the funds will be used for street repairs and maintaining police and fire services. Such promises are of course meaningless and can be changed at the next council meeting. Even if the current city council lived up to its promises, there is no assurance that future councils will be similarly inclined. One needs look no further than the promises of 2010 that this tax would be temporary for evidence of that.

In their current ballot arguments supporting Measure N, the city council and its supporters make much of the fact that the tax is simply an extension of an existing tax and not a new levy. Conveniently overlooked of course is any acknowledgment that the 2010 tax increase they now seek to extend was never intended as anything but a temporary tax to help the city through a period of financial crises.

The city council and its supporters also fail to acknowledge the council’s inability or unwillingness to rein in growing unfunded pension and health care liabilities. And in that regard, it is of particular note that among the supporters of Measure N is the Santa Rosa Police Officers Association (SRPOA) whose members are the primary beneficiaries of those excessive pension plans.

The city’s finances are as strong today as they have been in nearly a decade. The justification for a temporary tax increase no longer exists. It’s time to let this tax expire as it was originally intended. SoCoTax urges a No vote on Measure N.
The Last Word

By Dan Drummond

One of our local elected officials, let’s call him Joe, recently shared with me his frustration that voters don’t trust him. Joe is a good guy. He means well and was no doubt motivated to seek elective office out of a genuine passion to make a meaningful contribution to his community. But Joe is experiencing a frustration no doubt shared by many of his colleagues as the public grows increasingly suspicious of their motives and less inclined to accept their promises as reliable.

Unfortunately for Joe, voters have been burned too many times as elected officials promise one thing only to come up short on the delivery. In some cases, original promises are completely disregarded while in other cases the original promises are so watered down as to bear little resemblance to their genesis. In the worst cases, voters have seen elected officials feather their own nests with public monies that should have been used for community good. One need look no further than local county supervisors who in 2004 approved retroactive pension increases and now, in retirement themselves, collect those hefty pension checks they approved for themselves.

The lack of trust is acute and in most cases self-inflicted. Santa Rosa’s Measure N currently on the ballot is a perfect example. Measure N was put on the ballot by a unanimous Santa Rosa city council seeking to extend for another eight years an existing sales tax increase first approved by voters in 2010. The 2010 measure was promoted by then city councilmembers as a temporary sales tax necessary to help the city bridge budgeting shortfalls brought about by the recession. The 2010 measure is scheduled to expire in 2018, but by placing Measure N on the ballot two years early, the city council is engaging in some political hijinks that will give it a second bite at the apple in 2018 should voters turn them down this year.

Looking back at the official ballot arguments supporting the 2010 measure, voters were told the tax increase was necessary to reverse the effects of a general fund that had been slashed by $21.9 million (16.8%) and to stem the rate of employee layoffs resulting from the elimination of 174 positions (20% of the city’s employees). Voters were further told the tax was necessary to restore park and street maintenance (down 70% and 25%, respectively). The doom and gloom continued as voters were further warned of fire station closures, street lights darkened, browning parks and unfilled potholes. The Finley and Ridgway Swim Centers as well as the Senior and Homeless Centers were all said to be on the “chopping block.”

In order to assure skeptical voters that the city council sought the additional funds only to ease the effects of the recession and not to secure a new long-term funding source, the official ballot arguments repeatedly refer to the tax as “temporary,” “short-term,” and being for a “limited time.”

Returning to the present, the recession of 2010 is behind us. Many voters continue to suffer the effects of the recession to be sure, but for the city, revenues in the form of property, sales and hotel bed taxes are all on the rise. In fact, Santa Rosa’s revenues are stronger now than they have been in nearly a decade, all of which begs the question, why is the city council seeking to continue a temporary tax intended to help Santa Rosa get through the recession when the recession is no more?

Depending on your level of cynicism, you might answer that question by saying councilmembers have become comfortable with the additional revenue and failed to plan for its expiration in 2018. If you tend toward the more cynical, you might say that councilmembers, and perhaps all politicians in general, are simply unable to rein in their spending habits and are engaged in a perpetual quest to separate ever more tax dollars from their constituents. If you’re a bit less cynical, you might look at the current ballot argument and see that they now argue the tax is necessary to maintain emergency services, 911 response...
Regardless of your answer, there are a couple of truths that cannot be ignored. First, Santa Rosa’s current councilmembers evidently have no intention of respecting promises made in 2010 that the sales tax is temporary. A promise made six years ago apparently need not be kept. Second, politicians will say whatever is immediately expedient to the cause du jour with little or no regard for the long term consequences of their actions. Anything that can be said to convince skeptical voters to approve a tax is apparently fair game.

The quickness of elected officials to say whatever is expedient in the moment and then to disregard it a moment later creates justifiable mistrust among voters. Shortsighted councilmembers who turn their backs on the promises made six short years ago in the hopes of extracting a few more tax dollars from taxpayers’ pockets effectively undermine public confidence in our elective institutions. That, Joe, is why we don’t trust you.

Just For Fun Answers

#1. Governor Edmund G. “Pat” Brown. In November 1963, he oversaw the state’s purchase of a 19-passenger, twin-engine Convair plane that had been owned by entertainer Arthur Godfrey. The purchase was criticized by Republicans and by the state’s legislative analyst. When Governor Ronald Reagan took office after Governor Pat Brown, he authorized the sale of the gubernatorial plane, and returned to the system used by previous governors who relied on commercial and charter flights, and occasionally on flights aboard California National Guard aircraft. Governor Reagan subsequently leased a jet, and the plane’s owner explained that “by the early 1970s, the use of a scheduled air carrier by a governor jeopardized the safety of everyone on board, and charters required waiting periods – it just wasn’t working out.” Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger famously used a private jet to commute from Southern California to Sacramento, and a spokesman said in 2008 that the governor bought carbon credits to offset the environmental impact of his frequent flights.

#2. A gym. He also proposed a full-time nurse or therapist in the statehouse “to watch our health,” and suggested putting a sauna in the basement for lawmakers. Mr. Ryan later was elected to Congress, and served three terms before being murdered in Guyana, less than two weeks into his fourth term, by members of the Peoples Temple. He is the only member of the U.S. House of Representatives to have been assassinated in office.

#3. San Diego County. The refund was accomplished by issuing refund checks to those who filed claims for purchases of $5,000 or more during a specified period, and by temporarily rolling back the county’s sales tax rate by 0.75 percent to provide more broad-based relief. The successful challenge of the tax was mounted by Richard Rider, who continues to be a vocal advocate for taxpayers. The courts ruled that the tax was illegal because it had not been approved by at least two-thirds of the local voters, as required under the state constitution.

#4. One, in the delineation of the colonists’ complaints against King George III: “For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent.” (The word is not used in the section, often quoted by taxpayers, that states: “He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.”)
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SONOMA COUNTY TAXPAYERS’ ASSOCIATION
PO BOX 14241
SANTA ROSA, CA 95402