

# Tough choice 350 on schools: higher taxes or closures

By Carolyn Jones  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Alameda voters embark today on a monthlong, mail-only election to decide whether taxes will be raised to support public schools. Both sides describe the outcome as Armageddon for the quiet island city.

Measure E is a parcel tax that would give Alameda some of the highest school taxes in the Bay Area: Homeowners would pay \$659 a year and business owners would owe up to \$9,500 annually per parcel.

If it passes, many small business owners, already struggling with the recession, say they'll be forced to close, stripping Alameda of its mom-and-pop charm. If the measure fails, the district's superintendent warns that half the schools in town would close.

"If this doesn't pass, all bets are off in Alameda," said Encinal High School Principal

*Alameda continues on A7*

## Tax plan

Alameda voters begin voting by mail today on Measure E, a parcel tax to fund schools.

▶ It would raise \$14 million annually for eight years.

▶ Residential property owners up to age 65 would pay \$659 per parcel.

▶ Commercial property owners would pay 13 cents per square foot, up to \$9,500.

▶ It would replace two other school taxes, Measures A and H.

# Voters face hard decision: taxes or school closures

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Mike Cooper, a fifth-generation Alamedan. "We're watching the collapse of public education. We've been trying to make this work, but something's got to give."

Business owners agree that at this point, all bets are off.

"If this passes, then God help us, there'll be no end," said Ed Hirshberg, who owns numerous commercial properties in Alameda but lives in Oakland. "The schools want more money from us, but the problem is there's no money available."

## Center of family life

For generations, schools have been the center of family life in the 72,000-resident town. Most kids walk to their neighborhood school, and residents rally for fundraisers, sports and other school events. Families often move to the 11-square-mile island specifically for the schools, many of which boast some of the best test scores in the region.

But the school district has never quite recovered from the Navy's departure in 1996. Not only did the district lose hundreds of students whose parents lived or worked at the Alameda Naval Air Station, but it also lost extra funding the Navy provided the schools. Fourteen years later, the former base remains mostly vacant, without the students or property tax revenue to compensate for the loss of Navy money.

In addition, Alameda re-

ceives less state funding per pupil than most other districts in the county because of a funding formula that was drawn up decades ago. Alameda receives \$5,777 per student, while Dublin, for example, receives \$6,680, according to the Alameda Education Foundation. Alameda is one of nine districts that filed suit against the state last week over funding inequities.

The 9,500-student district has managed to scrape through the past few years, but with the latest round of state cutbacks, the district now finds itself on the precipice of disaster, Superintendent Kirsten Vital said.

"It's devastating and abysmal," she said. "We're looking to Alameda voters because the state of California is not funding education as it should."

## \$14 million annually

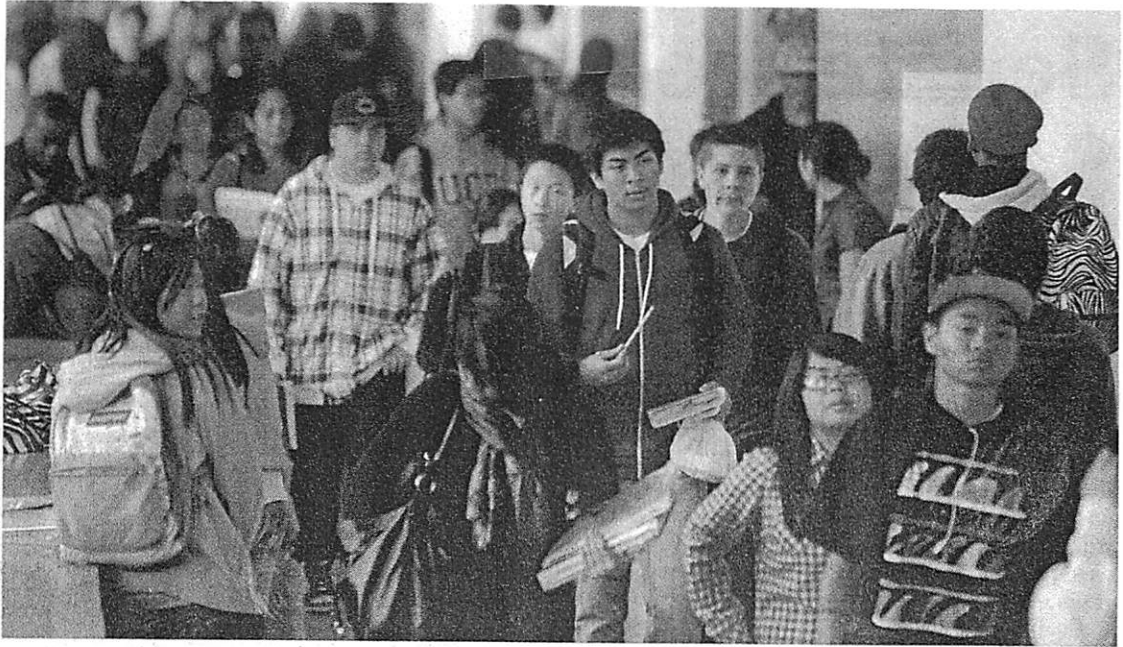
Measure E would raise \$14 million annually for eight years to keep libraries open and staffed, maintain small class sizes, and pay for music, arts and athletic programs as well as advanced placement courses.

If Measure E fails, the district would need to drastically cut its \$80 million annual budget — and the school board would probably do that by closing one of the city's two main high schools, one of its three middle schools and up to five elementary schools, Vital said.

"If they start shutting all the schools, I don't know what our family will do, to be honest,"

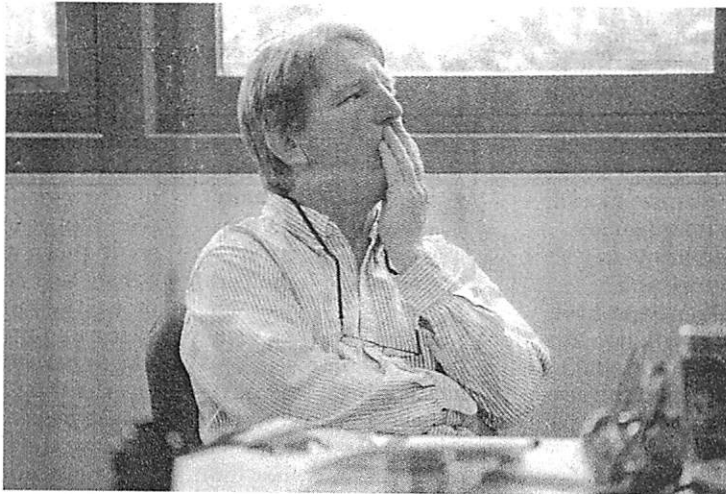
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Photos by Mike Kepka / The Chronicle

**Students walk the halls of Encinal High School in Alameda, where if Measure E, a school tax, does not pass, the school could face closure. It is one of two main high schools in the city.**



**Encinal High School Principal Mike Cooper, a fifth-generation Alamedan, says that the state of public education is collapsing.**

said John Knox White, a parent with two students in Alameda public schools. "A lot of great things have happened in Alameda the last 10 years, and most of them are a direct result of the great schools here."

#### **Tax called unfair**

Business owners say they love the schools, too, but the tax is unfair and far too steep. In one case, a family-owned

boatyard, which encompasses four parcels, would owe nearly \$40,000 annually.

In a recession, raising taxes is unrealistic and unfair to small business owners, said Kris Vosburg, director of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association.

"People care about the kids, but they care more about keeping a roof over their head," he said. "These school districts

need to realize, the reason the schools don't have any money is because we, the taxpayers, don't have any money, either."

Pasadena and Pleasanton are two affluent, family-friendly towns that have recently turned down school taxes. Piedmont, by comparison, nearly always says yes to school taxes and has some of the highest in the state: an average of almost \$3,000 annually per homeowner.

As state cutbacks continue, voters can expect an increasing number of pricey school taxes, leading to a two-tier education system that favors towns where voters can afford the higher taxes, said Alameda County Schools Superintendent Sheila Jordan.

"Education should not be funded on a community-by-community basis. We need to change the way we govern ourselves, so schools are funded equally," she said, adding, "but these are unprecedented times."

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E-mail Carolyn Jones at [carolynjones@sfcchronicle.com](mailto:carolynjones@sfcchronicle.com).