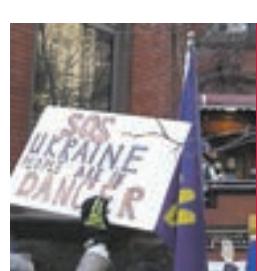




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SPECIAL REPORT

IN THE CENTINELA VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT,
HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN CONSTRUCTION
CONTRACTS HAVE BEEN STEERED TO A FIRM THAT IS
BANKROLLING ELECTIONS FOR BOARD MEMBERS.

PAY TO PLAY

By Rob Kuznia
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For a couple of moms from working-class families hoping to retain their seats on the Centinela Valley school board, it was a stark lesson in machine politics.

In a small room at the Proud Bird restaurant near LAX, a group of maybe 15 had gathered to support

Inside: The Centinela Valley school district has rare access to a garran-tuan cash cow PAGE A9



CHUCK BENNETT — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Voter-approved bonds generated millions of dollars to allow the Centinela Valley

school district to fund a massive makeover at Hawthorne High School.

the wives of both men.

All for two women in a tiny district that oversees just three comprehensive high schools in Lawndale and Hawthorne.

"It was kind of odd," Suarez said. "They were giving us money — I'm not used to any of that. ... To tell you the truth, I didn't even realize they were giving for us at first."

The event was a window into the political machine that has been picking leaders in the tiny district since 2008. In the two past contested elections, TELACU has poured large amounts of money into

campaigns to elect their favored candidates who almost always win.

TELACU won, too. Since 2008, the TELACU-backed Centinela Valley school board has put two construction bond measures on the ballot totaling nearly \$200 million. Voters approved both, and TELACU was awarded contracts to manage the construction projects.

Clem, president of TELACU Construction Management, did not return calls from the Daily Breeze on Tuesday and Wednesday. But Centinela Valley

CENTINELA » PAGE 9

"It was kind of odd. They were giving us money — I'm not used to any of that. ... To tell you the truth, I didn't even realize they were giving for us at first."

— Sandra Suarez, former Centinela Valley school board member

LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Interim sheriff has no small task ahead

With only 10 months, Scott looks to reforms

By Christina Villacorte
[@LADNvillacorte on Twitter](mailto:christina.villacorte@langnews.com)

Interim Sheriff John Scott is not wasting any time.

Given only 10 months — at most — to lead the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department out of the mess left behind by now-retired Sheriff Lee Baca, he is scrambling to put reforms in place.

"There's a new sheriff in town," Scott told the Los Angeles News Group during an interview this week at LASD headquarters in Monterey Park.

"I'm committed to transparency, to ethical behavior, to ensuring that all of the rules are enforced," he added. "We don't break the law to enforce the law."

Scott served 36 years at the LASD before retiring in 2005, frustrated with the direction it was going in.

"It was painful," he said about SHERIFF » PAGE 5

STATE GOVERNMENT

South Bay cities prep for larger pension contributions

By Fenit Nirappil
The Associated Press

SACRAMENTO » California's government will increase the amount it contributes to state employee pensions starting this summer, and cities and other government agencies will follow suit in two years, to help cover the cost of benefits for retirees who are living longer.

The board of the California Public Employees' Retirement System approved new assumptions for the pension system Tuesday that effectively increase contribution rates.

Projections show workers are expected to live an average of as much as two years longer, driving up the cost of paying benefits to people until they die. Women retiring at age 55 in 2028 are expected to live to 87.

Contributing more to CalPERS' \$282.5 billion pension fund means local governments will have less money to pay for services such as police, roads and parks. But delaying payments to the pension system would cost more in the long run.

Most county and city governments surveyed by associations agreed with CalPERS' approach to phase in the increase over five years and spread the total cost

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CENTINELA VALLEY

Business corridor in El Segundo brings big money

By Rob Kuznia
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@robkuznia on Twitter

The Centinela Valley Union High School District serves a low-income population, but thanks to a quirky boundary line that juts into an unpopulated portion of El Segundo, the district has rare access to a gargantuan cash cow.

The eastern half of El Se-

gundo is home to one of the largest concentrations of corporate behemoths in the nation. It includes aerospace giants Northrop Grumman, Raytheon and Boeing, as well as other companies such as Xerox and Mattel.

Anytime the voters in the school district serving Hawthorne, Lawndale and Lennox approve a construction bond, about a third of the money comes from that

corridor. The district has passed two such bond measures since 2008, each worth nearly \$100 million.

These bonds have bankrolled the major construction projects underway at all of the district's three high schools — Lawndale, Leuzinger and Hawthorne.

That same business corridor also sits in the Wiseburn School District, whose three elementary schools and

one middle school serve a 4-square-mile patch wedged between El Segundo and Hawthorne.

That district, too, has leveraged the major construction projects underway at all of the district's three high schools — Lawndale, Leuzinger and Hawthorne.

For years, the students of the K-8 Wiseburn district were technically supposed

to matriculate into the Centinela Valley Union High School District. (In recent years, most kids in the district have opted to go to other schools, including a pair of charters in Wiseburn called Da Vinci schools.)

This past November, voters in the Wiseburn district voted to become a unified school district with its own high school. The money to build that school will come

from yet another bond measure — and the results are expected to be spectacular.

Preliminary renderings of Wiseburn High depict a futuristic building with plenty of natural lighting, an abundance of glass and a square atrium cutting down the middle of all four floors.

The school will be designed by Gensler, one of the largest architecture firms in the United States.

Centinela

FROM PAGE 1

officials have pointed out that as a result of the two successful bond measures — one in 2008, another in 2010 — major face-lifts have occurred or are in the pipeline for all three campuses. The proj-

Online: To read more about Centinela Valley's financial dealings, go to DAILY-BREEZE.COM/CENTINELA-VALLEY-INVESTIGATION

"I think it's outrageous they do this in low-income communities. What are we getting for it? I don't see anything except for these big fancy buildings. I don't see how they are going to make the kids any smarter."

— Larry Rudolph, Lawndale city councilman

his contract — also has taken a \$910,000 loan from the school district to purchase a home in Ladera Heights. He has 40 years to pay it off, at 2 percent interest — an unusually favorable set of terms.

Unusual donations

TELACU first demonstrated its ability to influence the outcomes of Centinela Valley school board elections in 2009. The company donated \$28,000 to a political action committee called Citizens for Better Schools, according to campaign finance reports obtained from the Los Angeles County Register-Recorder's Office. Citizens For Better Schools, in turn, dished out \$55,000 to purchase mailers and other promotional materials touting three candidates: Rocio Pizano, Hugo Rojas and Maritza Molina.

(By comparison, Pizano's election committee raised \$5,000, according to the documents. Rojas and Molina apparently raised no money.)

Pizano was an incumbent. But Rojas, a karate instructor and former Hawthorne school board member with at least two DUIs on his record — and Molina — then a 23-year-old recent college graduate — ousted two incumbents with education credentials. One of them, Rudy Salas, is the principal at Hawthorne Middle School. The other, Frank Talavera, is an educator who at the time was teaching at Gardena High School. Both opposed an effort to put a bond measure on the ballot in 2008.

Sources say those two board members were controversial as well and had a vindictive streak. Salas declined to be interviewed; Talavera couldn't be reached.

In his ballot statement that year, Talavera wrote that his experience "will help me guide

the district in a more positive direction where students are the PRIORITY and not buildings or superficial fix-ups."

TELACU's preferred candidates were triumphant. In December 2009 — a month after the election — the new school board unanimously approved Fernandez's generous employment contract. Not long after, the board voted to put another \$98 million bond measure on the ballot. In November 2010, the voting public gave its assent.

The initiative raised eyebrows on the Lawndale City Council.

"I think it's outrageous they do this in low-income communities," Councilman Larry Rudolph said. "What are we getting for it? I don't see anything except for these big fancy buildings. I don't see how they are going to make the kids any smarter."

Rudolph added that in his own elections, he does not accept campaign contributions. "I wouldn't want to be in debt to anybody," he said. "I don't have to do anything but vote my conscience."

Although it is common for big construction companies to make financial contributions for the passage of bond measures, it is rare for them to put up money for individual school board candidates — at least in the South Bay.

"In our case, I doubt anybody got a dime," said Jane Diehl, a former longtime school board member in the Redondo Beach Unified School District. Diehl was on the board when voters in the district approved a \$145 million construction bond measure in 2008. That project has been managed by the company Balfour Beatty.

"Most of the school board elections in Redondo are pretty sparse," she added, saying candidates there generally raise around \$8,000.

"If you want to win, you gotta walk" and knock on doors.

Mark Steffen, president of the Torrance school board, said he believes the same is true in Torrance Unified, where voters approved a \$355 million pair of bond measures in 2008.

Balfour Beatty manages those projects as well.

"They've never offered, nor have I sought out dollars from them," Steffen said.

In the Centinela Valley school district — which oversees Lawndale, Leuzinger and Hawthorne high schools — TELACU hasn't been the only heavy contributor to election campaigns.

In 2011, the investment firm Piper Jaffray of Minneapolis contributed \$25,000 to Citizens for Better Schools, donating much of that to TELACU's favored candidates. The two firms have combined forces elsewhere in support of school bond measures, including a 2010 bid in Claremont. Piper Jaffray contributed \$25,000 to that campaign, and TELACU \$20,000.

Also contributing to Centinela's 2010 effort to get a construction bond measure passed were law firms such as Dannis, Woliver, Kelley — which has a lucrative contract with the school district. (It donated \$7,500.) Another law firm gave \$5,000.

Changing support

The event at the Proud Bird back in the summer of 2010 was a campaign fundraiser for the 2011 school board race. It was early in the game, and things wound up taking an unexpected twist — both Suarez and Ramos fell out of favor.

It so happens that Suarez is big on historic preservation. When it came to her attention that the bond measure called for knocking down much of Leuzinger High, she began to have doubts. By October 2010 — a few months after the fundraiser — she was fully opposed, and speaking out publicly.

It's less clear why the construction company ended its support of Ramos. But she — unlike the other three members — was generally known for occasionally voicing dissent on district matters.

In any event, Citizens for Better Schools found two new candidates to support: banking executive Lorena Gonzalez, who was challenging Suarez; and Ugo Felizzola II, a 24-year-old financial analyst who was trying to unseat Ramos.

This time, the political action committee spent \$82,000 on its campaign favoring those candidates. Once again, TELACU made a sizable donation; records show it contributed at least

\$10,000. (This was the race in which Piper Jaffray pitched in \$25,000.)

Because none of that money went to the candidates directly, they did not have to report the support. The committee spent at least \$26,486 on each candidate.

The money paid for slate mailers, door hangers, brochures and campaign signs, among other things, according to documents.

A political consultant closely aligned with TELACU met with leaders of the teachers union to request that they endorse the two political newcomers. The union declined, opting instead to endorse nobody.

The effort to oust Suarez was a success; Ramos managed to eke out a victory over the young Felizzola.

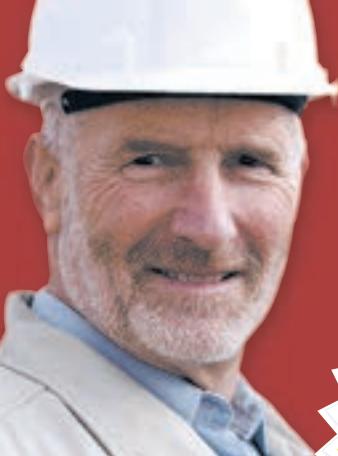
Suarez says that prior to the election, Fernandez sometimes took her and other board members to fancy restaurants such as Houston's in Manhattan Beach. The tab, she said, was often picked up by a law firm or by TELACU.

She later took her husband to Houston's, not knowing the prices.

"When we looked at the menu, we realized what they were, and we looked at each other," she said.

They ordered an appetizer, ate it quickly and left.

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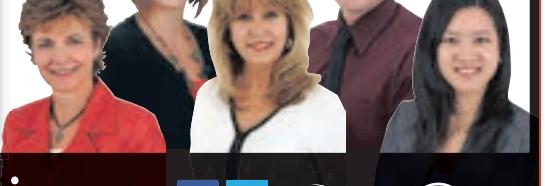
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