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# Parents upset with spending

**BY AMELIA BISCARDI**  
Daily Post Staff Writer

Parents and teachers of the Las Lomas School District descended on the board to criticize Superintendent Beth Polito's spending after a parent shared district credit card statements she obtained through a public records request. "To point out the obvious, there's a lot of pissed off people here," a parent named Craig said. "Everywhere we

## Looked at credit card charges

look, there's another problem." Parent Susanna Chenette began looking into the district's finances because of the teacher's strike last month, wanting to verify the district's claim they couldn't afford a 10% raise to the teachers.

Among the credit card charges, Chenette found lots of Uber rides, ho-

tel stays and two visits to Palo Alto's Fleming's Steakhouse.

The board's Wednesday meeting began at 5 p.m., fielding comments from residents with Polito sitting with the board before going into closed session. When they came back from closed session, Polito was gone.

A woman who only said her name is Nicole, pointed out when Polito was at the meeting, she did not make eye contact with any speakers.

President Heather Hopkins said that Polito went home as because was feeling unwell.

Those in attendance began groaning and complaining over Polito's absence prompting Hopkins to say "please don't

[See SPENDING, page 30]

## THE UPDATE

Dow <b>-0.59</b> 43,729.34	Nasdaq <b>+285.99</b> 19,269.46	Oil <b>-0.33</b> 71.93
Gold 2,704.90 <b>+41.70</b> NY COMEX futures courtesy of Mish Int'l (650) 324-9110		

### TRUMP'S CHIEF OF STAFF:

President-elect Donald Trump has named Susie Wiles, the manager of his victorious campaign, as his White House chief of staff. She would be the first woman to hold the influential role. Wiles is widely credited within and outside Trump's inner circle for running what was, by far, his most disciplined and well-executed campaign.

### SO. CAL FIRE:

A wildfire in Ventura County has destroyed 132 structures in less than two days. Fire officials said 88 other structures were damaged but did not specify whether they had been burned or affected by water or smoke damage. The fire started Wednesday morning and has grown to about 32 square miles. Some 10,000 people remained under evacuation orders yesterday as the Mountain Fire continued to threaten some 3,500 structures in suburban neighborhoods, ranches and agricultural areas around Camarillo in Ventura County.

### MONKEYS ESCAPE:

A police chief in South Carolina says there is "almost no danger" to the public after [See THE UPDATE, page 30]

# Board praises tall building

**BY BRADEN CARTWRIGHT**  
Daily Post Staff Writer



**PLANS FOR FISH MARKET** — Stanford and developer Gary Johnson from Menlo Park want to build these apartments next to Palo Alto Square at 3150 El Camino Real. Rendering from Studio T-Square.

The idea of an 80-foot building in Palo Alto would've been controversial just a few years ago, but pressure from the state has shifted the conversation around housing.

The city's Architectural Review Board gave a thumbs up yesterday to a proposed 368-unit apartment building at 3150 El Camino Real, replacing McDonald's and the Fish Market.

"This is an excellent project and we should do everything we can to approve it as soon as possible," board member Peter Baltay said.

The architect designed a building that feels in scale with the city's old 50-foot height limit, board member David Hirsch said.

"It's kind of Palo Alto's first venture into [See TALL, page 30]

# State prop failure affects projects here

**BY BRADEN CARTWRIGHT**  
Daily Post Staff Writer

The failure of a statewide proposition that would've made infrastructure bonds easier to pass has implications for local construction ideas, like a new Los Altos police station and a rebuilt Cubberley Community Center in Palo Alto.

Prop. 5 would've reduced the threshold for passing infrastructure bonds from two-thirds to 55% — the same as school facility bonds.

Prop. 5 was opposed by the California Taxpayers Association and supported by the League of California Cities.


Prop. 5 is headed for failure, to the dismay of Los Altos Mayor Jonathan

Weinberg. He has been trying to figure out how to pay for a new police station because the existing station doesn't have air conditioning and the basement floods.

Pollsters told council in May 2023 that a funding measure was unlikely to get voter approval. The failure of

[See FAILURE, page 30]

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## TALL

massive, really big buildings and population. And we need it desperately to answer the state's issue," Hirsch said. "So I think it's a prototype of something that should even be considered for the future in other buildings in the city."

Board members said the architect did a good job of breaking up the building with features like recessed windows and balconies, rather than having long two-dimensional walls.

"I really appreciate the ins and outs of the building," board member Kendra Rosenberg said. "I appreciate the dynamic facade of this. I think there's been a lot of thoughtfulness in terms of how this will present."

Council has committed to permitting 6,086 homes in the city's 2023-2031 Housing Element, a state-mandated plan that identifies potential sites for new housing and programs to make housing easier to build.

### Taller along El Camino

Part of the city's strategy is allowing taller and denser buildings on El Camino Real and San Antonio Road.

Council in December 2023 voted to raise the height limit to 85 feet along El Camino Real between Page Mill Road and Matadero Avenue, including Palo Alto Square.

Stanford and its development partner, Gary Johnson of Acclaim Companies, first applied to redevelop the property in December 2022.

Johnson in August 2023 submitted a "builder's remedy" application for an 85-foot building with 380 apartments.

The "builder's remedy" is a provision in state law that says developers can ignore local zoning rules in cities with an out-of-date Housing Element.

The deadline to finish the 2023-2031 Housing Element was Jan. 31, 2023, but the city didn't get the state's approval until Aug. 20, 2024.

### Working with developer

Since the builder's remedy application, the city has been working with Johnson to get a project that meets the city's standards, Principal Planner Garrett Sauls said yesterday.

Johnson turned in a city-compliant project on Aug. 13, while leaving the builder's remedy application on the table in case his latest proposal doesn't get approved.

"It's the culmination of two years of collaborative work between our design team and Palo Alto planning staff," Johnson said yesterday.

Baltay commended city planners for working proactively with the developer.

"It's the first time in many, many years that you just worked with the applicant to find a project that works. We've avoided a builder's remedy project. We've brought something together that really meets our standards. We've compromised. They've compromised. It really works," Baltay said.

The project now heads to the Planning and Transportation Commission for a recommendation to council.

### The details

The project has seven stories, with a terrace on the sixth floor, and a two-level underground garage with 428 spaces.

Two courtyards and a swimming pool would go on the ground floor.

Of the 368 apartments, 74 apartments would be reserved for lower-income residents, with rents set to match their pay.

A single person making between \$64,500 and \$103,200 could qualify in a lottery for a lower-rent apartment.

## SPENDING

disturb the meeting." Polito announced her retirement on Oct. 16. Her last day will be on Aug. 30, 2025.

The board on Wednesday discussed having a third party audit the district's credit card statements due to the outcry over Chenette's findings. The board decided to have trustees Jason Morimoto and Gautam

Nadella reach out to the San Mateo County Office of Education to see if it can help with an audit.

Nadella suggested the board find ways to simplify finances and add more insight into the monthly expenses.

"I don't have a problem with a third party audit, except I don't think we should be spending money on it," board member Paige Winikoff said.

### Teacher made similar request

Teacher Whitney Thwaite said she made three requests for the district credit card statements in September. When she submitted a Public Records Request, she was told by the county that they could dedicate an hour each week to tracking statements down.

Thwaite called the credit card company, who confirmed statements should be available online. She finally got the statements on Oct. 21, two days before the strike.

She said she wants a moratorium on retreats and hiring additional administration.

The credit card statements showed Polito spending over \$4,000 at a New York hotel and a stay for six district employees at a Disney-owned hotel for \$1,888. Hopkins told the Post that Polito and the other district employees were at the hotel for a conference.

### A lot of work to do

"I personally truly hate where we are in some places as a district right now," Nadella said. "I fully recognize there's a lot of work to do in the district around getting to a better place from a financial transparency and morale standpoint."

"When I went to the school board conference in San Francisco last year, I took public transportation, good 'ol Caltrain, because overnight parking was ten times more expensive," board member Laura Moon said. "It might not have been much money but to me \$100 saved was \$100 that we could put towards student outcomes."

Moon says the district's corporate credit card charges tend to be around \$100,000-\$200,000 a year, most of that being spent on conferences. Moon said while she is encouraged administration is committing to reducing conferences, she believes the board should reevaluate how corporate cards are used and increase transparency.

"Taxpayer money is not free money to spend," parent Christine Arnould said.

### Voted on teacher's contract

The board also voted 4-1, on Wednesday with the recently re-elected Jason Morimoto dissenting, to approve a new teacher's contract. Morimoto said he doesn't think the district can afford the new contract.

The district says the new contract will cost at least \$8.3 million. Under the new contract, the teachers will receive a 7% raise for the 2023-2024 school year, bringing their average pay to \$143,208.

The teacher's union accepted a contract for a 16% raise over three years and fully-funded health insurance, following a three-day strike.

"Our teachers and support staff deserve every penny that they earn," Hopkins said. "I'm really concerned about the cuts we'll need to make to afford these new contracts."

The school district's total revenue for the 2024-2025 budget is around \$38 million a year, according to their approved budget.

## FAILURE

Prop. 5 makes it less likely that the city of Los Altos would seek to fund a new police station with general obligation bonds, Weinberg said.

"I think the 55% threshold works well for school districts and I continue to think it would work equally well for cities, counties and special districts," Weinberg said.

Weinberg thanked state Sen. Josh Becker and Assemblyman Marc Berman for helping to bring the proposed constitutional amendment to the voters.

### Hillview failure

Los Altos City Council asked voters in November 2015 to take out a \$65 million bond to fund a new

Hillview Community Center with a pool and an improved park.

The measure was resoundingly defeated, with only 29% of voters approving the bond.

Instead, the city took out a commercial loan to pay for a smaller project.

### Cubberley plans

At the Cubberley Community Center in Palo Alto, the school board and council announced on a long-awaited land deal last month.

The city agreed to buy seven acres from the district for \$65.5 million, as long as voters approve a bond to pay for the purchase in November 2026, City Manager Ed Shikada said in a report to council.

Before going to voters, the city will need a plan for a rebuilding the community center at 4000 Middlefield Road, Shikada said.

That plan will depend on polling and how much voters are willing to spend, Councilman Pat Burt said in a phone interview on Wednesday.

It's possible the city will need to look at both a full rebuild as well as a major refurbishment with some new buildings, Burt said.

"Simply because the cost of construction has become so incredibly high in just the last few years that I expect the cost of a full rebuild of Cubberley is going to shock people," Burt said.

The city will look back to a 140-page "Cubberley Concept Plan" for the site completed by a design consultant in 2019.

### City will have to move quickly

Plans for both the city and the school district have changed since then.

"Making the 2026 ballot will require an expedient process to identify which elements of the Cubberley Concept Plan remain relevant," Shikada said in a report for council.

A nonprofit that is fundraising for a city-owned gym could advance its project at Cubberley before the city is ready to break ground, Burt said.

### Why it was on the ballot

Prop. 5 was put on the ballot by the state Legislature when the Bay Area Housing Finance Authority was considering a \$2 billion bond to fund affordable housing projects.

The regional agency ended up abandoning the bond at the last minute. But the idea was to reduce the threshold and get bond approval at the same election.

"The high cost of housing consumes too much of our paychecks, and many middle-class families are being pushed out of the communities where they work and where their children go to school," said the argument in favor of Prop. 5.

"California already has more debt than any other state," said the argument against. "Taxpayers pay those costs through higher property taxes. Higher property taxes mean higher house payments for homeowners, higher rents for renters, higher costs to farmers, and higher prices for everything we buy since local businesses will have to pass their higher property taxes on to consumers."

## THE UPDATE FROM PAGE 1

43 monkeys escaped from a compound used for medical research. Yemassee Police Chief Gregory Alexander says the monkeys from the Alpha Genesis faculty aren't infected with any diseases and are harmless and probably skittish. Police say the female Rhesus macaque primates escaped when a new employee didn't fully shut an enclosure.

**JAIL FOR RBG RECORDS:** A former health care worker who illegally accessed the health records of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg before she died has been sentenced to two years in prison. Trent Russell, 34, worked at the time as a transplant coordinator in the Washington, D.C., region and had access to hospital records. A jury convicted him earlier this year of illegally accessing health care records and destroying or altering records.

**ELLISON GOES TO JAIL:** Caroline Ellison, a former top executive in Sam Bankman-Fried's fallen FTX cryptocurrency empire, has begun her two-year prison sentence.