

OPINION

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Paving the Way For New Schools

by Richard A. Patterson
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The Signal's fine columnist Tim Myers recently authored an informative and timely series on the Santa Clarita Valley Facilities Foundation, the nonprofit, public benefit corporation that helps locate and develop school sites in our community for the William S. Hart Union High School District.

We appreciate Myers' independent review, which found the Foundation to be financially sound, well-managed and successful in the critical role it plays in helping to build a strong and vibrant school system. Everything the Foundation does is aimed at the overall goal of helping our children get the best possible education by providing the best facilities.

We agree with Myers — and are quite proud — that the Foundation's success now places it in a position to be a net generator of new funds for the continuing development of school facilities in the Hart School District.

As pointed out, the Foundation entered into a lease-purchase agreement with the district and a joint-venture agreement with the city to develop the Golden Valley High School site, a significant portion of the new Golden Valley Road, and 17 acres for single-family homes contiguous to the school site — all on property developed by the Foundation.

Seven years of volunteer effort by a dedicated board have resulted in millions of dollars in savings for the city, the district and the taxpayers. Additionally, by acting as the developer, now all of the profits created by the Foundation will be used for the benefit of the school district.

It was Myers' suggestion that all profits be disbursed to the school district as soon as we receive them. However, we believe the better alternative is to disburse the funds to the district pursuant to a strategic plan developed in cooperation with the district.

Per the Foundation's governing documents, filed with the California attorney general and secretary of state, all funds generated by the Foundation may be used only for the benefit of the Hart district — period. That is why institutions like College of the Canyons, California Institute of the Arts, Henry Mayo Newhall Memorial Hospital, the Child and Family Center and others have created similar foundations.

Our goal is to be responsive to the school board's requests for assistance with facilities projects, and then cooperate with the district to ensure that the funds we contribute are used efficiently and that the value is maximized with state matching funds or by investing in school projects that serve multiple education purposes. Like any other organization involved in land acquisition and development, the Foundation needs working capital.

If requested by the school board to secure a new school site, we need to contract on a regular basis for a wide variety of pre-purchase services such as surveying, environmental, title and legal work. We need soil and geologic tests on sites to satisfy local, state and federal rules and regulations.

Maintaining prudent reserves gives the Foundation the flexibility it needs to operate efficiently. Having a reasonable level of working capital gives us the ability to move and react quickly to opportunities — which helps us to obtain the best prices for land and construction services.

The Foundation's financial independence from the day-to-day workings of the Hart District school board is also necessary to our very successful relationship. The two entities, while both dedicated to the benefit of the school district and the education of our children, must remain separate and independent to comply with state laws, as Myers noted. To be seeking funds from the district on a regular, day-to-day or project-by-project

basis could jeopardize our independence and therefore the benefits that an independent foundation brings to the school district.

As Myers pointed out, all of our funds are used to benefit the school district, and that can take a variety of forms. The Foundation and the district are, for instance, currently considering a proposal for the construction of performing arts centers at both Canyon and Saugus high schools. If, after thorough design and needs analysis, it is agreed by the school district trustees and the Foundation that this will be the best use of the funds, the majority of the Foundation's anticipated income could go toward those new centers. The performing arts centers will provide unique and substantial benefits to each of the schools as well as to the communities they serve. These are facilities that neither the district nor the state would be able or willing to fund on their own.

If the district receives a contribution of funds from the Foundation earmarked specifically for the centers, then the school board may become eligible for matching state funds. The new centers will be designed as multipurpose centers allowing for additional classrooms, practice and performing facilities.

At the request of the school board, the Foundation has also supported several other charitable, nonprofit and governmental agencies with projects that fall within our policy of providing facilities that benefit students within the district. They include the City of Santa Clarita Aquatics Center, Sierra Vista Junior High School and the Boys & Girls Club facility.

The Boys & Girls Club project is a perfect example of projects that maximize the benefits to the children in the school district. The facility is used as classrooms by day, after-school programs in the afternoon, and other purposes in the evenings that contribute to the development of our children and community.

With the Foundation, our community has found a way to improve funding for our schools, reduce the taxpayers' burden and give our children the quality education they deserve.

Achieving such goals does not come easily. It takes planning, cooperation and hard work. In the end, we have developed an institution and process that works. We invite the continuing input from the community.

Richard A. Patterson is president of the Santa Clarita Valley Facilities Foundation. His column reflects the views of the Foundation's board of directors, and not necessarily those of The Signal.