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My View

## **Cosentino: Auburn school district should try to leverage its win**

Guy Cosentino May 24, 2013

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Tuesday's passage of the Auburn Enlarged City School District's \$68 million budget by a more than 3 to 1 margin is remarkable on many levels. While school leaders can and should be very happy with the results of their low key but aggressive push on the budget, it will be interesting to see if the district can leverage the win into getting other community initiatives moved forward.

Let there be no doubt that this budget didn't just pass on its own. One worry was that with the lack of competitive board races that turnout could be low (it was the lowest since 1998) and traditional naysayers on the budget would outnumber supporters. That didn't come to pass. Behind the scenes, the district has learned from past mistakes on budgets and referendums that have gone down to defeat, making certain that the word got out and knowing that budgets don't pass without effort. Credit needs to be given to new superintendent Constance Evelyn, who made it a priority to present the budget and talk about its highlights at any venue where she was asked to be.

There is little question that one reason this budget passed is the so-called windfall from Albany that changed the classification of Auburn to a high needs district. The extra \$2 million not only allowed Auburn to not have a massive tax increase (keeping the tax levy increase to well below the state mandated tax cap), but also making changes to district operations that were easy to explain to the public. Changes in how special education, arts and sports, while all having an increased cost, were items that the public could identify with.

While it is early to start listing the big stories of 2013, the biggest may be the way the current board, after years of infighting and friction, worked together in this budget campaign, even if just subliminally. Credit also has to go to the board, especially outgoing member Jason Lesch, for its efforts in selling Albany on the high needs case. Lesch, who unfortunately decided not to seek a second term, had made it his mission to make Auburn's case — and did so, articulating Auburn's position with state officials, pulling out his spread sheets to explain how Auburn was justified. He even went so far as to pay for a bus to transport Auburnians to Albany to advocate (they hate the word “lobby”) for the district.

So where does Auburn go from here? Just as it is thought that it is horrible to waste a “good crisis” to get things done, it is also a waste to not push an agenda that can use an existing reservoir of good will. So whether it is pushing for doing something with the closed West Middle School or working to make sure that Auburn is not “academically insolvent,” the school district has the opportunity to utilize the success of Tuesday to continue to improve.

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