

Measure P in voters hands

Public has voiced opinions on both sides of the issue

By **David Richards**

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The polls open bright and early 7 a.m. Tuesday for the special statewide election.

Eastern Madera County voters will voice opinions on eight state propositions and some will decide on several school board positions in their respective areas and on one of two school measures.

One such measure is Measure P, which would unify the Yosemite Joint Union High School District with the Coarsegold Union School District.

The measure needs a simple majority to pass, and if that happens, a new board of trustees will be formed to replace the two existing boards.

Eleven candidates are in the running for the five new board positions if the unification passes. If it fails, both boards remain intact.

According to a unification time line provided by Bill McCabe, superintendent of the Yosemite Joint Union High School District, the unification process began in January of 2003, when the board of trustees from both the Yosemite and Coarsegold districts approved an established merger committee to look deeper into the possibilities of unifying the two districts.

McCabe said the committee was made up of roughly 16 people, including representatives from both districts, administrators, teachers and other school employees.

In May 2003, following a feasibility study conducted by certified public accountant Christy White of San Diego and a recommendation by the merger committee to move on in the process, both the Yosemite Joint Union High School District and the Coarsegold Union School District school boards approved the unification resolution.

Following the approval, the issue then went to the county level, where public hearings were held in various mountain communities during the month of September, 2003.

The state board approved the resolution in July of this year, with the Madera County Superintendent establishing the election for proposed unification the same month.

If Measure P passes, the current Yosemite and Coarsegold school board members will work with the unified board until the unification becomes official in July, 2006.

Public opinion has been expressed on both sides of the issue.

Those expressing support for unification include McCabe, Linda Olson, president of the Yosemite Joint Union High School District's board of trustees, and Sue O'Connor, president of the Coarsegold Union School District's board of trustees.

"There have been so many checks and balances along the road," Olson said. "To have gone through all of the steps and to have reached the voters, we all see this as a win-win situation."

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McCabe said the unification process is a way to channel the resources of the two districts, which already share the same superintendent, the same director of food services and the same director of transportation.

McCabe also added the unification will generate an additional \$1.13 million into the unified district per year without a cost to local taxpayers.

"Unification would bring in dollars that would make our good programs better," O'Connor said.

Others aren't too sure about combing the two districts into one.

"In the first place, Coarsegold Union School District is supported and paid for by the property owners of Coarsegold," said John M. Kearney, a Coarsegold resident since 1990. "Why should Ahwahnee, Fish Camp, Bass Lake and Oakhurst have a vote for what's best for us up here? It's wrong."

Kearney said he has a family member who teaches for Coarsegold Elementary and a grandson who attends Yosemite High School and added that he's not very fond of the possibility of a unified board where its members all reside outside of Coarsegold.

"I feel very uneasy about it," he said.

The 11 candidates vying for the five seats on the unified board are a mix of current Mountain Area school board members and local business men and women.

The three candidates receiving the highest number of votes, if Measure P passes, will receive three-year terms, with the next two candidates receiving one-year teams.

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