The Tangled Web of SDUSD Bond Initiatives

SUMMARY

Between 2008 and 2022 San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) persuaded voters to support a total of \$11.6 billion in four separate bond initiatives to improve school facilities, enhance safety, and update instructional technology and classrooms. As of January 2025, \$7.02 billion of the \$11.6 billion in authorized bonds have been issued. To fund the bonds, property owners residing in the school district are subject to four distinct property tax assessments which are combined as one line item on the property tax bill. Property owners will continue to pay tax for some of the bonds already issued until at least 2054.

State election law regulating bond initiatives presented for voter consideration provides both general and specific guidance. In general, it notes, "... the essence of compliance with this chapter is good faith in presenting to voters the most accurate available information for their use in effecting comparisons and exercising judgment in casting their ballots." It requires voter information to include both average annual and maximum property tax rate increase estimates required to pay off the bonds. It also requires a best estimate of the total debt service, including principal and interest, that would be required to be repaid if all the bonds were issued and sold.⁴ SDUSD has not been consistent in adhering to these requirements when providing information to voters deliberating bond initiatives.

In 2000 California voters approved Proposition 39, which added additional requirements for school bond programs while lowering the majority required for approval from two-thirds to 55 percent.⁵ Schools were required to provide a "... list of the specific school facilities projects..." to be funded by the bonds and to create a citizen oversight committee to ensure bond proceeds were used only for those specific projects.⁶

SDUSD was not consistent in providing specific lists of projects to voters for its four bond initiative ballot proposals. Where school specific projects are listed, they are regularly duplicated from one bond proposal to the next. Measure U, the 2022 SDUSD bond initiative,

did not list school specific projects, but instead offered categories of proposed work.⁷ A dedicated voter would have to read through to page six of the information guide for Measure U to find, listed under "Quality Neighborhood Schools" a new program to construct housing for SDUSD staff.⁸

SDUSD routinely opts to put new bond initiatives before voters even when there are unissued bonds and unexpended funds available to it from one or more previously approved bond initiatives. As a result, its four active voter-approved bond programs are being executed concurrently. Beginning in 2012, the Board of Education merged the project lists from the (2008) Proposition S and (2012) Z-funded programs. As new bond measures were approved, their projects were also merged into a single master list. Records show a single school project can involve funding from all four bond programs simultaneously. This weakens the argument that each bond initiative presented a "specific list" of projects for voter approval. It also makes it more difficult to hold SDUSD accountable to voters.

The 2024-2025 San Diego County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) recommends that in future bond initiatives SDUSD:

- Inform voters of the total amounts of prior property tax assessment rates related to all
 outstanding SDUSD bonds, in addition to the new proposed property tax rates associated
 with any new bond initiative
- Provide voters with a comprehensive total debt service figure (amount borrowed plus
 accrued interest over the length of the bond) including pending debt service for all
 outstanding bonds previously approved by voters as well as a total debt service estimate
 associated with any proposed new bond initiative
- Provide the required school specific list of unique projects to be financed by each bond
- Ensure the County Registrar of Voters receives summary ballot language that includes key property tax rate increase information and total debt service information, both for the bond presented for voter consideration and for previous outstanding bonds already approved by voters

- Ensure the County Registrar of Voters receives accurate and updated data regarding initiatives which the proposed bonds will support
- Provide voters with the total amount of previously approved bonds that have not yet been issued by SDUSD
- Inform voters whether SDUSD has had to seek a waiver to exceed the state-defined 2.5 percent assessed property value limit for issued bonds

BACKGROUND

The Grand Jury has previously reviewed school bonds across the County of San Diego. Its 2008-2009 report¹² commended SDUSD for successful implementation of the \$1.51 billion Proposition MM school bond program, approved by voters in 1998. Projects funded by Proposition MM concluded in 2009.¹³ As of August 2024, \$616,314,442 of Proposition MM bonds were still outstanding, and would be repaid by July 1, 2031¹⁴ barring any additional bond refinancing.

Even as Proposition MM projects were in the last phase of completion, SDUSD launched the first of four additional school bond initiatives, all of which were approved by voters. As of January 2025, they were:

- (2008) Proposition S: \$2.1 billion authorized, \$1.287 billion bonds issued¹⁵
- (2012) Proposition Z: \$2.8 billion authorized, \$2.8 billion bonds issued¹⁶
- (2018) Measure YY: \$3.5 billion authorized, \$2.295 billion bonds issued¹⁷
- (2022) Measure U: \$3.2 billion authorized, \$640 million bonds issued¹⁸

As of January 2025 \$7.02 billion,¹⁹ of the \$11.6 billion in authorized bonds have been issued across the four active bond programs, which are executed concurrently using a single master list of supported projects.²⁰ To fund the bonds, property owners in the school district are subject to four distinct property tax assessments which are combined as one line item on the property tax bill. Proposition S (2008) continues the maximum property tax assessment of its predecessor bond program Proposition MM (1998) without adding new property tax rate increases;²¹ the

subsequent three bond programs each add an additional property tax assessment not to exceed 6 cents for every \$100 of assessed property value per bond initiative. Property taxpayers will continue to pay for some of the bonds already issued until at least 2054.²²

Already there are signs that SDUSD may be preparing for an additional bond initiative in the near future. Even with \$4.58 billion in voter-authorized bonds left to issue, SDUSD administrators predict an unfunded gap in Major Repairs and Renovations (MRR) of at least \$1 billion.²³ New programs, including transitional kindergarten²⁴ and staff housing construction,²⁵ may prompt requests for new bond financing. Recently a member of the Board of Education suggested expanding a pilot program providing pre-school care at Logan Memorial, which might pose new facility needs.²⁶ The Grand Jury feels this is an opportune moment to review SDUSD's good faith in providing voters with clear information about its intentions and complying with oversight requirements.

PROCEDURE

The Grand Jury wishes to stress the important contribution made by independent journalism to its work. In conducting this investigation, the Grand Jury:

Reviewed documents, websites and other materials including:

- The California Education and Election Codes
- Ballot language for Proposition S, Proposition Z, Measure YY and Measure U
- San Diego County Taxpayers Association Bond Report Cards
- San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) records, reports and presentations
- Independent Citizen Oversight Committee (ICOC) minutes, quarterly and annual reports
- Performance and financial audits for SDUSD bond programs
- Independent media reports including KPBS, the San Diego Union Tribune, and the Voice of San Diego
- Prior Grand Jury reports

Conducted interviews with:

• SDUSD administrators and staff

- Members of the ICOC
- San Diego County staff
- Knowledgeable private sector experts

The Grand Jury notes that SDUSD failed to respond to repeated requests for documents and some interviews, impeding the conduct of this investigation.

DISCUSSION

SDUSD, with its well-reported financial constraints,²⁷ ²⁸ ²⁹ declining enrollment trends (which impact state revenues based on attendance) ³⁰ ³¹ ³² and location in a region with generally strong property values,³³ logically addresses major infrastructure needs through local bond initiatives. State laws and policies encourage school districts to place bond ballot initiatives before voters.³⁴ School districts that acquire local financing for infrastructure projects qualify for state grants for both new construction and modernization.³⁵ A 2018 study demonstrated that, state-wide, 65 percent of school infrastructure needs were funded through school bond initiatives.³⁶

California regulates school bond initiatives. The 1994 Election Code requires school districts placing a property-tax funded bond initiative on the ballot to provide voters information, which includes the best estimate of the average annual property tax rate that would be levied in order to repay the bonds; the best estimate of the highest tax rate that might be required; and the best estimate of the total debt service.³⁷ The Election Code includes the statement, "The Legislature declares that the essence of compliance with this chapter is good faith in presenting to voters the most accurate available information for their use in effecting comparisons and exercising judgment in casting their ballots."³⁸

The California Constitution, as amended by Proposition 39 in 2000, requires that school district bond initiatives placed before voters be limited to the "... construction, reconstruction, rehabilitation, or replacement of school facilities, including the furnishing and equipping of school facilities, or the acquisition or lease of real property for school facilities." School districts may not use the funds to pay for administrator or teacher salaries or other operational costs. The proposed bond initiative placed before voters must include, "[a] list of the specific school

facilities projects to be funded . . . " The bond initiative must also include a commitment to complete annual financial and performance audits. These commitments are communicated to voters through the voter information guide mailed by the County of San Diego Registrar of Voters. Others.

For each of the four bond ballot initiatives under review, SDUSD developed and provided the full text of Board of Education-approved ballot language and voter information to the County of San Diego Registrar of Voters, including the proposed title of the bond initiative and a proposal of the 75-100 word summary that appears on the actual ballot.⁴¹ Studies demonstrate that voters considering a ballot initiative will often rely only on the ballot summary to make their decision.⁴²

SDUSD has not consistently complied with some elements of the Election Code or the California Constitution when it comes to informing voters about bond ballot initiatives. Voter information guides for the four initiatives ranged from 11 to 197 pages, yet deficiencies are present in each.

Property Tax Assessments

All four bonds clearly indicate the maximum property tax rate increase associated with the specific bond, usually in the "Tax Rate Statement" portion of the voter information guide. Proposition Z (2012) voter information prepared by SDUSD informed voters in the "Tax Rate Statement" that, "The tax levied for the Bonds authorized by this measure will be in addition to and not limited by the 6.67 cents per \$100 (\$66.70 per \$100,000) of assessed valuations tax limit established by Proposition S approved by the voters in 2008." It confirmed a tax rate on assessed property value of 6 cents per \$100 in addition to assessments already made for Proposition S.⁴³

However, in subsequent bond initiatives placed before voters SDUSD obscured the fact that property tax rate increases are cumulative as new bond initiatives were approved. Language prepared by SDUSD for Measure YY (2018) in the required "Tax Rate Statement," estimated a maximum additional tax of 6 cents per \$100 of assessed property value and reported only: "The

estimates are in addition to, and not inclusive of, other taxes levied by the District to pay bonds authorized at past elections."⁴⁴ This would be the third property tax assessment increase related to SDUSD bonds, but a voter would not realize that from any of the materials provided in the voter information guide. Measure U (2022) "Tax Rate Statement" language approved by the Board of Education repeated the same vague language,⁴⁵ failing to advise voters that this would authorize a fourth property tax rate increase for SDUSD bonds.

Total Debt Service

The voter information provided for Proposition S (2008)⁴⁶ and Proposition Z (2012)⁴⁷ did not include any information about debt service totals as required by the Election Code.⁴⁸

Measure YY (2018) did include in the "Tax Rate Statement" portion of the voter information guide that total debt service for the \$3.5 billion in bonds over their anticipated 39-year lifespan would be \$7.5 billion.⁴⁹ However, in the summary information that appeared on the ballot, voters were informed that debt service would be "\$193 million in average annual repayments" over a 39-year term.⁵⁰

Measure U (2022) similarly estimated total debt service of \$7.3 billion to repay the \$3.2 billion in bonds over 39 years in the "Tax Rate Statement" section of the voter information guide. In the ballot summary SDUSD again reverted to an annual number, this time \$330 million "annually while bonds are outstanding," so the voter couldn't calculate the total if they tried.⁵¹

Specific Lists

The California Constitution requires school districts proposing bond initiatives to provide voters with "[a] list of the specific school facilities projects to be funded . . ."⁵² Proposition S (2008) materials provided to voters included a one-page summary of general projects slated to be undertaken with bond funds if approved, including Major Repairs and Renovations (MRR) and

construction to accommodate enrollment increases. This was followed by 85 pages listing individual schools and proposed projects for those schools, including substantial projects slated for Carver Elementary, Chollas/Mead Elementary and Franklin Elementary, among others.⁵³

Proposition Z (2012) offered a 2.5-page summary of general projects, expanded to include instructional technology and energy efficiency. Following the summary pages, voter information included 90 pages of school-specific projects, many of which were repeated from the Proposition S list, including almost verbatim the same major projects identified for Carver, Chollas/Mead and Franklin, among others.⁵⁴ The San Diego County Taxpayers Association opposed Proposition Z in part because of its plan to use long-term bonds to pay for laptops and other computer equipment with shorter lifespans.⁵⁵

Measure YY (2018) followed the same pattern, providing a three-page summary of general projects followed by almost 150 pages of proposed projects, including generally the same projects for Carver Elementary, Chollas/Mead Elementary and Franklin Elementary (among others).⁵⁶ The many similarities between project lists were noted by media and the San Diego Taxpayers Association, which recommended a "no" vote on Measure YY.⁵⁷

When SDUSD proposed Measure U (2022) to voters it abandoned the school-specific list of projects and offered only the generic umbrella categorization of work that could be financed by the bonds, without giving voters information about which specific schools would benefit.⁵⁸ It added funds for building staff housing under the rubric, "Quality Neighborhood Schools."⁵⁹

Beginning in 2012, the Board of Education merged the project lists from the Proposition S and Z-funded programs.⁶⁰ As new bond measures were approved, their projects were also merged into a single master list.⁶¹ Records show a single school project can involve funding from all four bond programs simultaneously.⁶² This contradicts the argument that each bond presented a "specific list" of projects for voter approval. It also makes it more difficult to hold SDUSD accountable to voters.

Ballot Summary

The Election Code sets the expectation of a district's "good faith" effort to give voters the information needed to make their decision, ⁶³ and nowhere is this more important than in the 100-word summary which appears on the ballot. Studies have shown many voters rely on that information to make their decision on an initiative. ⁶⁴ The key elements the Election Code ranks as important enough for voters to know as cited in law include the property tax rate increase and the total debt service. ⁶⁵

In summary ballot language prepared by SDUSD, Proposition S (2008) offered only "no increase in tax rates," ⁶⁶ perhaps leading some voters to understand that property tax owners would not be out of pocket for these bonds. The truth however is that Proposition S committed not to exceed the property tax rate increase of \$66.70 per \$100,000 of assessed property value⁶⁷ first approved by voters in 1998 under Proposition MM. No debt service information was provided.

For Proposition Z (2012), ballot summary language did not reference the fact of any property tax rate increase for Proposition Z, although the voter information guide makes clear there would be an increase not to exceed \$60.00 per \$100,000 of assessed property value. No reference to total debt service was presented in the ballot summary.⁶⁸

For Measure YY (2018), the ballot summary language did mention the potential property tax rate increase of 6 cents per \$100 of assessed property valuation. It also included reference to the annual estimated debt service payment (not the total debt service payment specified in the Election Code). It did not remind the voter that the tax rate increase and debt service would be in addition to those already implemented for the two previous bond initiatives approved by voters.⁶⁹

Similarly, the Measure U ballot summary included the potential property tax increase of 6 cents per \$100 of assessed property value and an annual debt service estimate with no reference to the number of years of payment. It failed to mention that these would be in addition to the other three property tax rate increases and debt service payments associated with bond initiatives voters had already approved. Measure U also introduced two new areas for bond funding – transitional kindergarten and staff housing – which were not mentioned in the ballot summary language. Measure U authorized SDUSD to seek a waiver of the State of California Education Code⁷⁰ cap which limits the amount of bonds it can issue to 2.5 percent of assessed property values. This was also omitted from the ballot summary.⁷¹

Unissued Bonds

SDUSD also failed to disclose to voters considering its request for new bond authority that it had billions in unissued bonds still available from previous voter-approved bond initiatives. When voters cast their ballots in November, 2012 for Proposition Z giving SDUSD authority to raise \$2.8 billion in new bonds, the school district still had \$1.5 billion (out of \$2.1 billion initially approved) in unissued bonds from Proposition S.⁷² In 2018, when SDUSD asked voters to approve \$3.5 billion in bonds in Measure YY, it still had \$1.035 billion in unissued bonds from Proposition S and a further \$925 million in unissued bonds from Proposition Z.⁷³ Finally, in 2022 when voters were asked to authorize \$3.2 billion in new bonds for Measure U, the school district had essentially that exact amount available in unissued bonds previously authorized by voters: \$818 million in unissued bonds authorized by voters in Proposition S, an additional \$150 million in unissued bonds authorized by voters in Proposition Z, and a further \$2.2 billion in unissued bonds authorized by voters in Measure YY.⁷⁴

FACT/FINDINGS

Fact: The California Election Code requires school districts to provide voters with the "best estimate from official sources of the average annual tax rate" as well as the "highest tax rate" that might need to be levied to repay the issued bonds.

Finding 01: SDUSD has not always complied with this requirement, either in voter information materials or proposed ballot summary language.

Fact: The California Election Code sets as a standard "... good faith in presenting to voters the most accurate available information for their use in effecting comparisons and exercising judgment in casting their ballots."

Finding 02: SDUSD has consistently failed to inform voters of previous property tax rate increases associated with prior SDUSD voter-approved bonds when placing new bond initiatives before voters.

Finding 03: SDUSD has not informed voters of total accrued debt service for all bonds previously approved by voters for which payment is still outstanding when presenting new bond initiatives for voter consideration.

Fact: The California Election Code requires school districts to provide voters with an estimate of total debt service associated with bond initiatives.

Finding 04: SDUSD has failed to provide total debt service in some bond initiatives placed before voters, and in summary ballot language has obscured the total amount of debt service by providing an annual estimate only.

Fact: The California Constitution requires school districts seeking voter support for bond initiatives to provide, "[a] list of the specific school facilities projects" to be supported by the bonds.

Finding 05: SDUSD has not provided meaningful, specific lists of projects to be funded by bond proceeds to voters.

Fact: Ballot summaries are a key source of information for voters.

Finding 06: Ballot summaries do not highlight debt service and property tax rate increase information as well as new initiatives voters are being asked to approve.

Fact: SDUSD has repeatedly proposed new bond initiatives before bonds previously authorized by voters have been exhausted.

Finding 07: Voters are not informed of any outstanding unissued bonds before being asked to authorize new ones.

Fact: The State sets a limit of 2.5 percent of assessed property values for the value of all bonds actually issued by a unified school district.

Finding 08: SDUSD indicated in 2022's Measure U that a "yes" vote indicated support for SDUSD to seek a waiver of the 2.5 percent limit, suggesting it anticipates exceeding it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2024-2025 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends that in future bond initiatives SDUSD:

R1: Inform voters of the total amounts of prior property tax assessment rates related to all outstanding SDUSD bonds, in addition to the new proposed property tax rate increase associated with any new bond initiative

R2: Provide voters with a comprehensive total debt service figure including prior approved debt service for all outstanding bonds previously approved by voters as well as total debt service estimate associated with any new bond initiative proposed for voter approval

R3: Provide voters with the total amount of previously approved bonds that have not yet been issued by SDUSD

R4: Provide the required school specific list of projects to be financed by the bonds

R5: Ensure the County Registrar of Voters receives summary ballot language that includes key property tax rate increase information and total debt service information, both for the bond under review and for previous bonds already approved by voters

R6: Ensure the County Registrar of Voters receives ballot summary language that includes any new initiatives which the proposed bonds will support

R7: Inform voters whether SDUSD would have to seek a waiver to exceed the 2.5 percent assessed property value limit for issued bonds

Note: the following Section will be automatically added to you report by the GJ Coordinator when report is published.

REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an <u>elected County</u> official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors. Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
 - (1) The respondent agrees with the finding.
 - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.
- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
 - (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.

- (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
- (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
- (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor. (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision-making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 are required from the:

Responding Agency	
San Diego Unified School District	
Recommendations	
R1-R7	

30-2024): https://sandiegounified.diligent.community/document/504897a6-4e45-4730-98b8-60d49b0d968a/
DRAFT Independent Auditor's Report, "Propositions S And Z and Measures YY and U General Obligation Bonds

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⁶ State of California, Constitution, Article XIII A Section 1, 2000.

er=5.&article=

https://law.justia.com/constitution/california/article-xiii-a/section-1/

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⁹ Crowe LLP, "San Diego Unified School District: Propositions S and Z Bond Program Performance Audit Report, June 2018, p.2. https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/sandi/Board.nsf/files/BBJRGL6DE6A7/\$file/SDUSD-

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¹² County of San Diego Grand Jury, "Proposition MM—A Success for the Schools," 2008-2009. https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/grandiury/reports/2008-2009/PropMMReport.pdf

¹³ Nigro, Nigro and White, "Proposition MM Bond Building Fund Of San Diego Unified School District Final Audit Report," January 9, 2009.

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¹⁴ Andra Green, "Resolution Authorizing the Issuance and Negotiated Sale Of Not To Exceed \$100,000,000 Of Proposition S Bonds, Not To Exceed \$350,000,000 Of Measure YY Bonds And Not To Exceed \$320,000,000 Of Measure U Bonds Of San Diego Unified School District, Prescribing The Terms Of Sale Of Said Bonds, Authorizing The Preparation And Execution And Delivery Of One Or More Bond Purchase Contracts, Paying Agent Agreements, Official Statements, Disclosure Dissemination Agent Agreements, And Investment Management Agreements For Said Bonds, and Authorizing the Execution Of Necessary Documents Relating To Said Bonds," Board of Education of the San Diego Unified School District, August 27, 2024, p. 7: District Resolution - SDUSD 2024O (Prop S), 2024H (Measure YY) and 2024B (Measure U) (combined Elections) 4143-0347-4513 3.docx approved per minutes: Active Meetings - Board of Education | 4100 Normal Street, San Diego, California 92103 | (619) 725-5550 BoardDocs® Plus

¹⁵ San Diego Unified School District Facilities Planning and Construction Division, "Propositions S, Z, Measures U and YY Monthly Controls Status Report January, 2025," January 2025, p.2: https://sandiegounified.diligent.community/document/504897a6-4e45-4730-98b8-60d49b0d968a/

¹ San Diego Unified School District Facilities Planning and Construction Division, "Propositions S, Z, Measures U and YY Monthly Controls Status Report January, 2025," January 2025, p.2 (reflects additional bond sales since 6-

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- https://sandiegounified.diligent.community/document/504897a6-4e45-4730-98b8-60d49b0d968a/
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- ²² DRAFT Independent Auditor's Report, "Propositions S And Z and Measures YY and U General Obligation Bonds Financial Statements," June 2024, pp. 30-35:
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