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LOCAL ELECTIONS

Voters pass all 23 L.A. County school bond measures

Fifteen receive more than a two-thirds majority, including L.A. Unified's \$7-billion Measure Q and the L.A. Community College District's \$3.5-billion Measure J.
By Howard Blume and Jason Song

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It wasn't Los Angeles County's 23 school bonds that drove people to the polls Tuesday, but voters willingly added all of them to the Barack Obama victory parade.

Despite a long ballot, national economic duress and competing tax measures, most of the bonds easily cruised to victory, including the largest ever for a California school district: the \$7-billion Measure Q for Los Angeles Unified. It won support from 68.9% of voters. (The bonds needed 55% to pass.)

Similar good fortune befell the \$3.5-billion Measure J, placed on the ballot by the Los Angeles Community College District and approved by a nearly 70% margin.

"We knew the kind of voters Obama would attract to polls included young voters, immigrant voters and other people who historically have put a lot of faith in the education system or investing in the future through education," said Measure J campaign consultant Richard Katz, a former state legislator.

Katz's worry, however, was that a first-time voter would wait in a long line, "do the Obama thing" and leave without making it through the rest of the ballot.

His campaign therefore upended conventional wisdom by targeting low-propensity voters. Mailers emphasized the role of community colleges in job training and also re-training people who suddenly need or seek new careers.

That theme, Katz said, resonated helpfully with the foreboding economic news -- even though bonds result in property tax increases.

Voters already are paying off a total of \$2.2 billion from college district bonds approved in 2001 and 2003.

The existing bill is even steeper at L.A. Unified, the nation's second-largest school system. Voters already had approved \$13.6 billion through four local bonds since 1997 to fuel the nation's largest school construction and modernization program.

L.A. schools Supt. David L. Brewer dismissed the burden of new taxes as secondary to the benefit of additional construction jobs. "This is the best economic stimulus package we could have," Brewer said Wednesday.

Going to the well again, however, angered some civic leaders after the bond package doubled in size at the last moment.

But steadfast proponents included Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who had agreed with expanding the bond after polling suggested voters would support it.

Villaraigosa appeared on campaign mailers, as did Police Chief William J. Bratton, a mayoral ally. The larger bond also resulted in more money promised for facilities for charter schools, which maintained a neutral position in the campaign.

That \$1-million effort included seven mailers, which especially targeted Republican women, a group identified as persuadable, said Measure Q campaign consultant Steve Barkan. L.A. Unified produced three "informational" mailers of its own.

"I heard about the reasons to vote for it, but I never heard reasons to vote against it," said Lizeth Robles, 18, a South Los Angeles resident who attends UCLA. On Tuesday night, she voted for it, as did her Spanish-speaking father, who presses clothes for a dry cleaner.

Edwin Morales, 26, said he also had no hesitation voting for both the college and K-12 bonds because he personally remembered conditions at Roosevelt High in Boyle Heights and at East Los Angeles Community College, from which he graduated in 2006. He is working his way toward a political science degree at Cal State L.A. with a job as a valet.

The most dominant school bond victory belonged to Alhambra Unified, which claimed 74.8% of votes for its \$50-million measure. Fifteen of the 23 bonds got more than a two-thirds majority, which had been required before California lowered the threshold to 55% in 2000.

The \$13-million bond for Acton-Agua Dulce Unified, in north L.A. County, prevailed in a squeaker, with 55.5%. No other bond received less than 60% support.

Long Beach Unified Supt. Christopher Steinhauser said he was never in doubt about his district's \$1.2-billion Measure K: "People are very supportive of schools because they can see an immediate result in their community."

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