

## Alameda voters rejecting tax to save schools

Carolyn Jones, Chronicle Staff Writer  
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Alameda voters were narrowly defeating a school tax Tuesday that both sides said would profoundly change the character of the family-centered island city.

Measure E was falling short in preliminary returns. Yes votes totaled 13,789, or 65.3 percent, while no voters were 7,297, or 34.6 percent.

The parcel tax, which needs a two-thirds majority to pass, was losing in a monthlong mail-in election in which several hundred ballots remained uncounted Tuesday night.

Measure E would give Alameda some of the highest school taxes in the Bay Area. Homeowners would pay \$659 a year, and business owners would owe up to \$9,500 annually per parcel.

If the measure fails, the school board said it will close half the schools in town. If the measure passes, small business owners say they'll have little hope of surviving as the recession wears on.

The Alameda County Registrar of Voters plans to finish counting ballots today.

"Almost two-thirds of Alamedans voted to support our schools," said Yes on Measure E spokesman John Knox White. "But whether it'll pass is up in the air. Nobody knows exactly how many ballots are still out there."

As the registrar counted ballots Tuesday night, the Alameda school board was voting on \$7 million in cuts. The gifted-student program, middle and high school counselors, adult education and other programs were likely to be eliminated.

The school district is looking to cut \$17 million over the next three years from its \$80 million annual budget. Slammed by state cuts, loss of revenue since the Navy left in 1996 and lower-than-average funding per pupil, the Alameda school district is faced with having to take desperate measures, Superintendent Kirsten Vital said last month.

If Measure E fails, the district will be forced to close six of 10 elementary schools, one of two middle schools and one of two high schools, she said.

Measure E would replace two other school parcel taxes that are slated to expire in 2012. Measures A and H, combined, taxed residents \$309 and business property owners 15 cents per square foot, capping at \$9,500 a year.

When the economy was booming, the parcel taxes were not such a burden, business owners said. But three years into a recession, a round of \$9,500-per-year taxes would be devastating, they said.

"If this passes, then God help us, there'll be no end," Ed Hirshberg, who owns several commercial



properties in Alameda, said last month. "The schools want more money from us, but the problem is there's no money available."

Measure E would raise \$14 million over eight years, and would fund libraries, smaller classes, arts, athletics, advanced placement classes and other programs.

Alameda has long been known for its neighborhood schools. Test scores are high at nearly every school in the 9,500-student district, and the schools tend to be the focus of neighborhood life.

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