

April/May President's Voice Article

How many of you are getting tired of the building construction and the temporary bathrooms? I certainly am. While I'm sure we are all ready to get our shared spiritual home back in order, we're also thrilled how it is turning out. We can finally see how this design will be a big improvement for our community and how it will properly represent our community's strength.

So when are we going to finish? Right now we are expecting to finish the majority of the construction by the end of May. As I write this letter, the biggest unknown is when we can upgrade our electrical service. At this point we don't have an installation date from PG&E. The construction end date depends on when we can get the electrical service installed. Once we finish the major construction and we get a Use Permit, we will begin to use the facility. If we are delayed for a long period of time because of the electrical service upgrade, we will ask Redwood City for a Temporary Use Permit to allow us to use the new bathrooms. You should know that it will still take us some time to complete many of the finishes. We plan to continue to work on the finishes over the summer with a goal to get most of them completed before the High Holy Days. The Solomon team understands that working around the construction has been difficult for everyone. We really appreciate how helpful and supportive everyone has been. Major construction will come to an end shortly, and it *will* be worth it!!

Now let me turn to what we normally talk about this time of the year: budgets, dues, and employee contracts. This year at our Annual Meeting will be voting on a new five-year employment contract for Bill Futomick, our Ritual Director. In addition, we will be voting on the new budget and a proposed 4% increase in dues. Let me start with Bill's contract. We're very excited to report that we've completed contract negotiations with Bill. The negotiation process was the same one we followed last year for Rabbi Ezray's contract. Everyone is satisfied with the outcome and looking forward to ratifying the agreement with the membership. The Board of Directors voted unanimously in favor of the new contract at the April meeting. Like last year, at our Annual Meeting we will present to you a report from the Pulpit Committee that explains how we came to this agreement.

In terms of the operating budget for next year, it seemed like this budget cycle was more difficult than last year's. Annual increases in health benefits and other employee costs require us to bring in additional revenue, which today comes primarily from dues. In addition, next year we are facing a new fiscal challenge because we are not expecting financial help from the Federation for Religious School scholarships. Even with these challenges, we have developed a balanced budget for the next fiscal year. To get to a balanced budget we had to make some hard choices and cut some items that we believe are very important. However, the good news is that we are not making any reductions or changes in staffing, which was very important to us. There were some reductions in employee benefits that we needed to make because of the increasing costs. Some reductions were mandated, and others were voluntarily offered. We were not happy about these reductions, but we felt it was appropriate; the benefits that we provide are fair, and it was fiscally responsible.

Last year, at our Annual Meeting and in my communications to the membership, I said that you should expect to see a 4% dues increase this coming fiscal year. That is where we are with this balanced budget.

To put this increase in perspective, over the past four years, since I've been in the role of President, Eric Sahn as Treasurer, and Eric Stone as Executive Director, the dues increases have averaged 3.5% plus the \$100 Building Maintenance Fee that we implemented this year. By the way, the annual \$100 Building Maintenance Fee has put our Building Maintenance Fund back on a stronger financial footing, which is fantastic. Our challenge going forward is to increase overall revenues. There are three ways we can do that: (1) Increase the size of our paid membership; (2) increase dues payments by families that can afford to pay more, and (3) consider other income options such as renting the facility on Sundays as we have done in the past. This year we will be exploring all of these options to help us get ready for the budget a year from now. At the Annual Meeting, I will discuss some plans that we are putting in place at the leadership level to help us grow the paid membership.

We will again be holding open meetings for you to look at the budget in detail and to ask any detailed questions. We hope that you will take advantage of one of those meetings. The dates/times for those meetings are Wednesday, May 18, at 7:00 p.m., and Thursday, May 19, at 10:00 a.m.

If you can't make one of those meeting and if you have questions about the budget, please contact Eric Stone. I'm sure we can make other arrangements for you.

One last point about the budget: The Board of Directors will vote to ratify the budget at its May 16 meeting. If you're looking at the budget prior to that date, you should consider it as a draft and understand that it is subject to change at the meeting. After May 16, we will have the final budget available for your review, and copies will also be available at the Annual Meeting.

Now I would like to turn to our other big accomplishment of this past year. As you know, most of our time for the past several months has been focused on the construction. For most congregations that would have been enough. However, while we were remodeling the building, at the same time, we completely transformed our Religious School. Under the leadership of Religious School Director Michal Braker, our Clergy, the NESS Committee, the Curriculum Committee, the Keshet Committee (parent support for school activities), the PAC (Policy Advisory Committee), and many volunteers, we have changed the Religious School experience for our students. Several parents have told me that their kids absolutely love Religious School. That feedback is what we have been driving toward on our 3+ year journey to transform our Religious School into a "best in class" program and a great experience for our children. It is truly amazing to say we are accomplishing it with our limited resources. We should be very proud of this accomplishment. We know it will pay dividends for years to come on so many levels. However, as you know this is not something that can stand still; we need to continue to improve and invest our school, and we must make it accessible for those that can't afford the tuition. That is why this year we will be putting a major emphasis on fundraising for Religious School scholarships. Our first fundraiser for the Religious School Scholarship Fund will be on May 22, the same weekend as the Scholar in Residence. It will be a benefit concert called "In the House." This will be a fun get-together, and I hope that all of you will take the time to join us and participate.

Finally, I want announce that we will be having our bi-annual Gala on November 19. We will be honoring Rabbi Ezra for all that he has accomplished for our community. It will be an exciting and fun evening. Please put this event on your calendar.

Let me close by saying that while we have accomplished a lot this past year, our primary goal remains the same: to become a strong vibrant *Kehillah Kedoshah*. The actions that we have been taking, such as the building renovation, the transformation of our Religious School, and renewing our clergy contracts, are all about making our community stronger for today and for our future. I thank you for your support and participation as our community continues to make Congregation Beth Jacob a very special *Kehillah Kedoshah*.