

Community Comment

By Jon Sapper

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School Enrollments on the Rise

What do school enrollments tell us about our community? Possibly, a lot. Forty-five years ago, there were over 26,000 K-12 students in Humboldt County; more than 25% of the entire county population. Today, we have around 18,000 students enrolled in public schools, charter schools (which are public schools) and private schools equating to about 13% of the county's population. That's a huge change!

Why did this happen? I haven't seen any studies, but there are many who believe that the major changes in our economy over the last 20 plus years have contributed. I would agree. The jobs that were here in the timber industry provided a good living where young families could buy a home, raise a family and participate in our community. For the most part, those jobs are gone. We have a new economy that promises a bright future, if we take advantage of it. And I'm not talking about the marijuana industry. I look at that industry as softening the blow that would have hit our area anyway from the resource base reductions. But it isn't our future and in my opinion, shouldn't be. Maybe we can talk about that in another community comment. Back to school enrollments.

This is the first year in over a decade where there are more children starting the school year than started the year before. More children are in kindergarten and grades 1 and 2 than in grades 10, 11 and 12. If this trend continues, we will see increases in the number of children in our community. I believe we have hit the bottom for school enrollments and will see small growth over time. So, as a community, what do we want their future to look like?

We hear pundits from all persuasions use the phrase, "Children are our future". If we truly believe that, then it is in our best interest to make sure those children get a good start. We have many success stories of children from our area doing wonderful things in academics, sports, and vocational hands-on activities. We need to do all we can, to nurture those interests of our youth, but we also need to keep our eyes wide open with the many challenges in our community that affect the environment in which we raise our youth.

Forty percent of our children, almost half, live in single parent households. There are challenges to make a go of it, when there are two responsible adults in the house, much less one. Over 25% of our children live in poverty. When compared to California on a per capita basis, Humboldt County has double the DUI rates, double the motor vehicle accidents, double the rate of suicides and triple the rate of drug related deaths.

We must come together as a community, even more than we currently do to address the underlying causes of these issues. Our future and the future of our children depend on it.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.