

School bond election could cost \$70,000

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Content

The Lancaster County school board has divided its members into two distinct committees — one for the proposed bond referendum and one for the superintendent search. The Bond Committee held its first meeting via livestream Tuesday, May 2.

Melvin Stroble, Margaret Gamble, Eddie Boykin and Brad Small are all members of the committee, with Stroble serving as facilitator. Small will oversee both committees.

Election dates, logistics and cost

There are three possible dates for a bond referendum election on the table: November 2023, March 26, 2024, and April 2, 2024. In order for the November 2023 election to be possible, every detail would have to be finalized and submitted by Aug. 15. Because 2024 is a general election year, there may also be county bond referendums on ballots then.

Lancaster County Elections Director Mary Ann Hudson told the committee that a special election could cost up to \$70,000. The 2016 bond referendum election cost \$23,471, according to Dr. Jonathan Phipps, Lancaster County School District superintendent.

Hudson's estimate is preliminary, and requires more research and set dates to determine the actual cost. Within the budget, the funds must cover poll workers, ballot cards, official seals and voting machine supplies, legal notices, absentee ballots, technicians and early voting locations and poll workers.

She estimated a \$41,000-\$42,000 cost for the general election and a \$25,000 cost for early voting.

State law requires that early voting take place for two weeks prior to the election, from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday, with a center in each represented district. It remains unknown whether Indian Land will have one or two early voting centers, due to its size and population.

Heath Springs, Kershaw and Van Wyck will all have municipal elections Nov. 7, 2023. Phipps asked Hudson if folding the bond referendum election into the same voting period as the three municipal elections would save money.

She said the only cost the combined election would cut down on is paying for poll workers, which she estimated would only cut election costs by \$3,000-\$4,000.

Ample notice is required for elections to occur, because the state election commission is bound by law to send ballots and notices to active military and overseas voters, even if there are no residents in either category. That process takes place 60 days before the election.

The school board must also find an attorney to handle the election verbiage documents and procedures. This includes every step of the process, from deciding what will be included in the bond, to funding matters, to submitting information to the state and county election commissions and finalizing election details and procedures.

Phipps said that Frannie Heizer, an attorney with Burr Foreman and general counsel for the S.C. Association of Governmental Organizations (SCAGO), spoke about SCAGO's bond-specific attorney services at two school board meetings. She could be chosen for this position, if the board votes to approve that.

"The subcommittee will further discuss the recommendation to present to the full board regarding a potential special election date for a school bond," Stroble said. "A November 2023 date presents a tight time frame to assess needs and determine costs."

Differences from 2016 to now

Hudson said the voting landscape has changed significantly since 2016, namely with new regulations on early voting and digitized ballot and voting machines. There was also no early voting requirement in 2016.

The county has also grown by several thousand voters since 2016, the last time the district and school board undertook this process. In 2016, the county had 55,000 registered voters. In 2023, there are about 72,000. In the 2016 election, 7,390 registered voters participated in the bond referendum election.

Action items

No matters were voted on at the meeting, and no final decisions have been made.

The board has not yet even voted on whether there will be a bond referendum, how much it would be for, or what projects it would include.

The board will have to vote on the date of the bond referendum election and the attorney they will use. The board must submit an election date to the election commission before any planning can begin.

“If y’all decide that you’re definitely going to have it (the bond referendum) and you definitely choose a date, even if you don’t have the verbiage and that, we can go ahead and start securing as far as the polling locations and our workers,” Hudson said. “Any lead time would make that a whole lot easier for our office.

“The only thing that becomes complicated, is that some of those polling locations, especially some of those bigger church facilities, their calendar is about a year ahead, and we would just have to see if we can secure those locations,” she said.

Possible issue

According to Stroble, there is a proposed bill in the Senate to prohibit local entities, like school boards, from having special elections.

“The concern is that special elections outside of the general election process do not give all the voters an opportunity to be informed about the particular referendum,” Stroble said.

Hudson was not aware of this affecting the proposed election, and she said the Senate is still meeting, and it “may be June or so before,” any issues would arise.