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Board debates \$200M school bond proposal

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Lancaster County School Board saw a first draft of a bond referendum proposal at its Feb. 3 planning meeting with school district officials.

The proposed bond includes \$170 million in critical needs and \$30 million for extra projects to be determined with the public's input, for a total of \$200 million.

A handout included the following critical needs:

- \$65 million for an Indian Land area elementary school
- \$65 million for a Lancaster area elementary school
- \$20 million for critical safety needs
- \$7 million for cafeteria upgrades

- \$5 million for land in the Indian Land area
- \$5 million for land in the Lancaster area

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- \$1.5 million for activity buses in every school area
 - \$1.5 million for window replacements

New schools needed

Two new elementary schools are needed — one in Indian Land, due to the growth there, and one in Lancaster to replace aging facilities, but the discussion focused on the needs in Indian Land.

Bryan Vaughn, district director of communications, safety and transportation, said Harrisburg Elementary is already over capacity at 962 students, and Indian Land Elementary is also reaching capacity with 1,001. Both of those schools already have portable classrooms. Van Wyck Elementary has 721 students, and will likely admit 100-150 more as

Walnut Creek continues to build out.

The average population of all district schools, excluding the Panhandle, average about 520 students. The average in the three Panhandle elementaries is 896.

“Our elementary schools are going to be at capacity within probably the next year to year and a half,” Vaughn said. “So our immediate need right now is an elementary school.”

Vaughn said building another elementary school in Indian Land would allow the district to move fifth-graders back into the elementary schools from the current intermediate school. He said this transition, if approved by the board, would lower the capacity of the Indian Land Intermediate School, which is “busting at the seams” with 1,078 students in a school built with core facilities for just 300.

The board recommended that the 30 acres it has agreed to buy on Harrisburg Road be used for the Indian Land area elementary school. It also recommended that the district buy land south of the current Indian Land complex, where the elementary, middle and intermediate schools are.

Vaughn said there are also future growth measures in mind for this bond, with funds allocated to redistribute and renovate existing facilities to meet the needs of the growing population for less money.

“If we get to the point where Indian Land High School is so crowded that we have to look at building another school, we think the most prudent thing to do would be go back and take the old Indian Land High School and turn it back into another high school,” he said.

Vaughn said he believes this plan encompasses maximizing land usage in a cost-effective way by not recommending the district build multiple new facilities, which could cost over \$100 million.

Beyond Indian Land

While Vaughn stressed the need for more Indian Land area schools, he said that does not mean the rest of the county can be ignored. He said some Lancaster schools were built as far back as the 1950s, and the district has not had the funding to renovate or improve them since.

“I have tried to emphasize with parents the things we have built in Indian Land have not been by choice, they have been by necessity,” he said.

Vaughn said he wants to ensure that putting more money in Indian Land to tackle massive population growth won't be done at the expense of other communities.

Board Chair Brad Small said the \$65 million fund allocation for a Lancaster area school may be discussed at future board meetings, but is uncertain until the final budget for the bond is presented.

The critical safety needs include better cell coverage in all buildings, panic buttons for teachers and faculty and improved camera surveillance systems. Vaughn said some surveillance systems are over 20 years old, and some schools do not have any cell reception on campus, which poses a major safety risk in an emergency.

Vaughn said activity buses cost \$100,000 each, and the district hopes to buy three buses for every high school area — Buford, Andrew Jackson, Indian Land and Lancaster. He said the district also hopes to buy small buses teachers and coaches can drive without having a commercial driver's license.

The cafeteria upgrades and window replacements would be for continued facility growth and upkeep maintenance across the county.

Taxes won't go up

“The idea with this (bond proposal) is we'll go back to taxpayers and it won't cost them a dime more than they're already paying,” Superintendent Jonathan Phipps said. “We'll have two elementary schools built with this, and to prepare for future growth, we will buy land in a new area.”

District Chief Financial Officer Jatana Norris has been working through the proposed budget with the goal of staying within the current 65 tax mills.

“You might say, ‘how can you raise \$200 million and not cost the taxpayer that?’ ” Norris said. “In working with our bond advisers...that's what we solved for. A lot of that is possible because we are going to have debt rolling off.”

She is assuming a 1% growth in millage over the over the 25-year life of the bond, with a projected interest rate of 5%.

Hotly debated

The bond proposal was hotly debated by school board members from each district. Courtney Green (District 3) and Margaret Gamble (District 6) said their communities of Buford and Kershaw, respectively, were not represented in the bond, and thought that their constituents would not vote for it.

Lancaster County voters have passed two school bonds in the last 23 years — one in 1999 and another in 2016 for \$199 million.

If the vote on the bond referendum fails, the district will be faced with a three- to four-year waiting period before it can propose a new bond.

Transparency important

School board member Casey Catoe (District 5) said there were promises made in the 2016 bond that still have not been fulfilled, and noted that voters have said they felt all the money went into Indian Land.

Board member Eddie Boykin (District 1) said the 2016 bond exposed lapses in communication between the previous board and the community, and the current bond needs to be as transparent as possible.

“You’ve also got to throw them (districts) some bones, I believe, between now and passing a bond that says ‘we hear you and we know there were some miscommunications,’ ” Green said. “And was that our (current board) fault? No, but we will stop passing the buck.”

Small said a bond is nothing more than a contract with debt, so if the board says it will do something in the bond, the board should treat it as a binding contract and stick to their word.

“Voters have long memories, so I just want to make sure we’re all aware,” said Melvin Stroble, who represents District 7.

“There’s nothing there for Kershaw,” Gamble said. “We’ve got the oldest elementary school in the county, and Indian Land gets it all.”

Small ended the discussion by urging the board to send in specific district needs before the Feb. 21 board meeting, so that the bond can encompass every district.

The school board hopes to have the bond referendum on the ballot for the November election.

Haley