

BALLOTS: School bond election set for May 17

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garnered significant community support — and some criticism. Most of the criticism has involved two aspects of the bond: paying for maintenance projects, and the construction of a new ball field and tennis courts.

Critics argue that maintenance projects should be paid for out of the district's operational budget, not deferred and pushed into a bond.

Jay Wilkins, an active advocate for the bond, notes that the district allocates \$1.3 million for care of facilities. However, he notes, items like HVAC upkeep are contracted "and it's a big chunk at once." The district has deferred such major expenses in an effort to avoid making cuts in the classroom during several years of declining enrollment and reduced budgets.

"It's been a strategic prioritization decision," he told *The Nugget*.

Wilkins noted that Sisters is far from the only district in this boat. In fact, the State of Oregon recognized that deferred maintenance has become a problem statewide, and has set aside some matching grant funds to assist with catching up on such projects. Sisters attempted to access such grant funds, but did not

qualify based on the community's assessed valuation and the district did not score in a lottery for other funds.

"To some extent this has become the new normal for the state," Wilkins said. "The State of Oregon has realized we've pinched schools to the point where facilities are suffering."

New tennis courts that will also be striped for pickleball are budgeted in the bond at \$357,500 and a new baseball field is projected to cost \$481,250. For critics of the bond, those facilities represent a "want," not a "need."

Wilkins acknowledged that some folks might perceive things that way. He noted, however, that Sisters is competing for enrollment with other local districts, and quality facilities are a necessity to prevail in that competition.

"If you want a thriving school district you need to invest in assets that are attractive to not only current students, but prospective... students and parents," he said.

He also noted that new and refurbished facilities will allow Sisters to host tournaments that bring revenue into the community.

The bulk of the approximately \$3.5 million of the bond allocated for athletic facilities — about \$2.7 million — is earmarked for replacement of the

condemned track and refurbishing of Reed Stadium to meet ADA standards and to improve safety and comfort for spectators.

Not having the stadium in an essentially condemned status "is a no-brainer for me," Wilkins said.

Voters rejected a \$14.5 million bond request in November 2014. Based on community feedback, the district came out this spring with the scaled-back \$10.7-million request. Asked if the current amount is really sufficient to meet the district's needs, Wilkins said, "It's the right amount to ask for now."

He acknowledged that the district will have to go out for a bond again after high school bonds roll off the books in 2021. The district plans to repair the high school's problematic roof rather than replacing it, kicking that can down the road to the 2021 window.

"The roof will need replacing," Wilkins said. "(Repairs) will get us through the 2021 need. I'm confident of that."

Wilkins and other bond proponents believe that the \$10.7 million will meet the district's immediate needs and put its infrastructure on an appropriate footing.

"We will feel that we've got a good, strong school when these projects are done," he said.

Ballots are due for the election on May 17.

Attacking the goal...



PHOTO BY JERRY BALDOCK

Samson Magnus makes a play in Outlaws Lacrosse action. (A photo in the April 20 edition did not identify him correctly).

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