

Three Rivers School District bond on May ballot

BY TOM CARSTENS

“Students should be safe, warm, and dry.” This is the stated goal of the Three Rivers School District facilities managers. With 15 schools and 4,500 students in a two-county district the size of Rhode Island, this is no small task.

To that end, the district has just paid off its last 20-year, \$24 million facilities bond, which was sold at a tax rate of \$0.74 per \$1,000 assessed property value. With that money and several smaller funding sources, the district built two new schools and continued improvements and repairs at the others. Since the district uses state funds for our schools generally to cover classroom costs and teacher salaries, facilities maintenance is up to the taxpayers. And it’s not cheap.

According to Three Rivers School District superintendent Dave Valenzuela, it’s again time for repairs. And they’re big ones—all related to keeping our students *safe, warm, and dry*. The school board has identified what they call “the Big Four” because every school requires extensive repairs in these four crucial areas. The repair bill is expected to come to around \$66.5 million.

No. 1: Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC). The systems range in age from 73 years to 17 years. They are barely able to keep up. Cost to repair: \$28.6 million. Just last year, one school suffered a boiler failure and had to suspend classes for several days.

No. 2: Water Systems. The water pipes and drainage systems are old and deteriorating. Cost to repair: \$2 million. As an example, Lincoln Savage’s sewer system has completely failed and must be replaced.

No. 3: Roofing. *All* building roofs must be replaced. Many are over 30 years old, and some are leaking badly. Repairs are no longer cost-effective. Cost to replace: \$29.2 million.

No. 4: Pavement. Parking lots, driveways, sidewalks, walk areas, and play areas are crumbling, creating hazards for the kids. Cost to repair: \$6.7 million.

But there’s more. After an exhaustive, wrenching process, each of the 15 schools has identified its own top three priorities outside of the Big Four. These cover various items like ceiling tiles, security fencing, outdoor lighting, fire alarms, door locks, flooring, wood rot, exterior paint, and outdoor classrooms. These basic repairs come to an additional \$18 million.

The grand total? It’s \$85 million.

Valenzuela says there’s no padding here. In fact, the list has been pruned quite a bit. The district’s own Master Facilities Plan has identified a whopping \$152 million in needed repairs and construction. The \$85 million addresses only the most crucial half of that figure.

As of mid-February, it looks like the school board has decided to put forth an \$85 million, 20-year bond levy on

the May ballot. This would tally out to a property tax rate of \$0.93 per \$1,000 of assessed value, or 23 cents more than the last district levy. For the median price of a home in Josephine County, \$220,000, this comes to an annual bond bill of \$211. This represents an average annual increase of about \$100. This comes to about \$8.30 per month, or less than two grande-size vanilla lattes at Starbucks.

Indications are that the annual bill to taxpayers will compare favorably with other local tax rates. This bond issue will cost a typical property owner:

- about half of what Applegaters pay for Applegate Valley Fire District services.
- about twice what Jackson County residents pay for library services.
- about two-thirds of the tax bill contemplated for the proposed Josephine County Fire District.

- quite a bit less than what is being charged in other local school districts.

So the proposed bond issue generally compares favorably with some of the other tax rates around us, but the question voters will have to decide is “Is it worth keeping our kids *safe, warm, and dry*?”

As Valenzuela puts it, “Facilities upgrades are needed now.” And he doesn’t want to divert state funds away from the classrooms to make that happen.

Ballots will be mailed May 18.

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An introduction to bond — school bond

Bond rates are a bit difficult to understand. Their value is expressed as a ratio of the dollar assessment to the taxpayer per thousand dollars of the *assessed* value of the owned property. The rate as expressed at the sale of the bond will generally decrease over the life of the bond, largely because (a) the assessed value of most property will inflate over this period, and (b) new construction sales during this period add to the pool of contributing taxpayers. Neither of these factors, however, has much effect on a taxpayer’s annual bill, which usually stays fairly constant until the bond is paid off.

So when you read, for example, of a bond *rate* shrinking over 20 years from 74 cents to 47 cents, as happened with the last bond issued by the Three Rivers School District, you should remember that your total annual tax bill did not appreciably change.

—Tom Carstens

Home school promises to teach children well

BY AMBER BISHOP

Did you hear? The world is changing, and so is education.

This past fall a new school opened its doors in the Applegate Community—virtual doors, that is. This unique school might better be considered a bridge between homeschoolers and educational resources—a school that genuinely supports each student on his or her individual path of learning. Many of the families involved are excited, too, about partnering with this school to build a campus for uniquely Applegate-designed and implemented learning programs for our children *and high school students*.

In the words of Director Bill Watkins: “TEACH-NW stands for Transforming Educational Access in Communities and Homes. TNW operates on the mission to meet the diverse educational needs of learners through its application of the 3W principles: Wherever, Whenever, Whatever: Wherever the student is located (home, school, or mobile); Whenever the student needs access to content (any time of the day); and Whatever the content needs may be with diverse course offerings

regardless of the student’s geographic location in Oregon.”

In TNW, families are free to design their children’s own education from scratch or to follow whichever curriculum most appeals to them from Waldorf to Montessori, Classical Education to Sudbury School and many more. Each family works with an Educational Facilitator (EF) to develop an Individual Learning Plan, a “living” document stating the topics each student will be learning over the course of a year and the plan for learning them. Families are encouraged to update it frequently. The EF helps families express their work in terms the state accepts. Families are in weekly contact with the EF and submit quarterly reports with photos demonstrating students’ growth and subject matter proficiency or the results of standardized testing, whichever the family prefers.

Families are also allotted \$2,000 per year per student for education-related expenses. This money can cover a variety of things: books, art supplies, online classes, a microscope, entrance fees to

ScienceWorks or OMSI, tutoring, a school laptop or tablet, martial arts classes, gymnastics, etc. Given the sacrifices taxpaying families make in order to homeschool, this allotment can be a real game changer for many.

Studies show greater happiness and long-term success among homeschooled children. This makes sense, since most people learn best when following their own interests and learning in a hands-on, relevant way. Some homeschoolers learn basic math skills through a passion for baking, building, or starting their own small businesses. Others learn science through participating in farm life such as gardening and animal care, while many polish their reading and writing skills as an essential means in pursuing their various personal goals or sharing their adventures with others through letters or a blog.

My family loves listening to audiobooks of stories set during a given time period while completing tasks such as folding laundry, picking through elderberries, or pulling weeds. Many subjects are offered through online classes, as well. There are certainly as many ways to homeschool as there are homeschoolers.

While not for everybody, homeschooling works wonderfully for many families. Children gain practical skills and deeper understanding of systems integration, cause and effect, and teamwork. Most homeschoolers receive broad socialization

as they are often learning in real-world settings with interaction among diverse age groups. Often, homeschooling parents even report great satisfaction with the arrangement, citing improved family relationships and more confidence in their children’s wellbeing.

TEACH-NW is a wonderful source of support and accountability for local families interested in homeschooling. Technological advances make these services easily accessible, an element especially important for rural communities.

We have gained additional options for our children *and* are actively working toward the goal of building a centrally located Applegate campus that will include high school. The TNW is fulfilling its mission of facilitating innovative, hybrid approaches to education with limitless potential for hands-on, real-world learning.

If you would like further information about TEACH-NW, its history, and/or homeschooling, please take the time to look at the following resources:

- marcola.k12.or.us/teach-nw is the main TNW website, which includes links to the waiting list and vendor/employment applications.

- nheri.org is the website of The National Home Education Research Institute.

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