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Trying to understand Lansing's school bond proposal

By DANIEL STURM October 22, 2003 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 1306

By DANIEL STURM

In less than two weeks the Lansing Public School District will ask voters to approve two bond issues totaling \$75 million for a new Pattengill Middle School, with pool, and the renovation of six other school buildings, including athletics facilities, and media and science labs. If passed, the owner of a \$100,000 home in Lansing will pay an extra \$98 in annual property taxes, for the next 20 years.

Although the proposal will appear on the Nov. 4 election ballot, public debate on the issue has been evolving rather slowly.

To make a contrast, in Ann Arbor, a series of public face-offs have been organized with Mayor John Hieftje and opponents to discuss the city's \$84 million greenbelt plan, which will also be voted on in the Nov. 4 election. More than 500 citizens participated in the first feisty debate one week ago.

But Lansing's public school officials are shunning critical discussion of their school bond. Last week, during a two-hour public tour of Detroit's new Heilmann Middle School, (the prototype for the proposed new Pattengill Middle), Superintendent E. Sharon Banks declined to answer questions regarding the new school, for which Lansing property owners are being asked to pay \$37 million. "I don't answer any questions today," she said.

Kathleen Langschwager, a member of the Lansing Board of Education from 1991 to 1996, who's running for the board Nov. 4, said that the district's restrictive information politics worries her, and that she's concerned about the financial discrepancies. "People are waiting for the district to tell them exactly where the money is going. I haven't seen this, and they ignore my questions."

Langschwager, a retired Michigan National Bank accounting specialist whose five children attended Pattengill, said she supports a new school but hasn't seen enough financial transparency. Langschwager remembers that in 2001 the district came up with a much lower figure for the construction. "There's something really wrong if a school can go from \$18.5 million to \$37 million in a period of two-and-a-half years."

According to the district's 2001 bond issue summary report, the costs of replacing Pattengill Middle School with a new building would be \$18.5 million. Last week, when school spokesman Mark Mayes was asked to explain the discrepancy, Mayes said he didn't know a previous figure had existed.

But one week later, after news of the discrepancy may have become awkward, Mayes responded differently.

"We had a different finance team back then," he said. "This lends to the way people report on things, and to the way they break down costs. And they were using the most minimal construction cost they could."

Mayes said that the \$18.5 million figure released two years ago hadn't included additional costs for site work, design and contingency spending. If these had been included, Mayes said the 2001 cost estimate for a new Pattengill School would have been \$30.2 million.

He said that the \$5.2 million cost increase in the 2003 proposal was in part due to the district's decision to add an 850-seat auditorium to the plan, and to higher costs for the proposed site on Marshall Street, which is almost double the size of the site where Pattengill now stands. "We will have higher costs for the landscaping, and also higher contingencies as far as the soil goes."

Lansing School District officials argue that one reason students are migrating is Lansing's outdated infrastructure. Banks said in an interview earlier this fall: "Some people say buildings don't make education. But boy, it makes kids feel a lot better when the lighting and everything is up to par."

Banks said she visited Holt Middle School to find out why some students are leaving Lansing. "It's beautiful. There are some special amenities that are really important to the kids. And that's tough for us to overcome."

Probably the most outspoken of the new school bond's critics is John Pollard, the organizer of Citizens Against this Bond. Pollard says he doubts that a new school could stop a demographic trend that started in the early 1980s and has more to do with a regional economic downturn than a lack of infrastructure, or an "image factor." Due to population decline, Lansing has lost more than 3,500 students since 1980, a decrease that has cost Lansing schools roughly \$25 million in state funding.

Educational funding in Michigan is tallied according to the number of students enrolled, with each district receiving an average of \$6,900 per student. Between 1993 and 2002 Lansing has lost 3,232 students, while Holt's Public School District enrollment rose by 571.

Pollard believes it is more reasonable for growing suburban school districts to spend money for new school buildings. "It makes sense for a wealthier community to build a Taj Mahal school, especially when everybody in that town is going to go to this specific school. But Lansing has four high schools, four middle schools, and 36 elementary schools. And we don't have that kind of money."

Pollard, who was a member of the district's bond committee formed in November 2001 as a reaction to the bond's defeat, also disagrees with the selection of Marshall Street as a first choice for the Pattengill site. "Why do we want to build a new school on the eastside, where we're losing population, while the projected population growth is way out on the south end of town?"

Mayes countered that there were good prospects for growth on the eastside when one took into account that Lansing is planning its largest housing development in decades in a location near the site for the proposed new school. A Detroit-area company plans to build 72 townhouse condos, 72 condo apartments and 33 single-family homes on East Saginaw Street.

Another financial issue revolves around the use of projected interest on the Lansing school bond. The bond proposal's total cost would amount to \$75,858,388. But its projected interest savings of \$883,404 would drop the actual costs to a total rounded estimate of \$74,975,000.

Finally, critics point out that the distribution of funds in the proposal is ambiguous. The school bond proposal is divided into two sections. The first includes \$67.5 million for a new Pattengill Middle School and provides funding for renovations, athletics, and science and computer labs for Dwight Rich, Otto and Gardner middle schools, and Eastern, Sexton and Everett high schools, as well as a 12,000-square-foot multi-purpose room for one of the magnet elementary schools.

The second asks for \$7.5 million to build a new swimming and diving pool that would be shared by Pattengill Middle School and the community and also funds to make improvements to Sexton and Everett high schools' athletic fields.

Mayes said that the bond was split into two parts in order to represent two different purposes. While Proposal 1 is mainly aimed at academic needs, Proposal 2 should be seen as an "additional asset," which will give the community access to the district's (new) swimming pool and athletics facilities, with new synthetic turf at Sexton and Everett

high schools.

Pollard called the logic of divided proposals misleading, because voters are made to believe that the first proposal is solely for academic purposes, while the second proposal provides \$7.5 million solely for athletics. "This is not true, because Proposal 1 includes even more sports-related costs than Proposal 2," said Pollard. In fact, the bond scope for Proposal 1 includes \$11 million for sports-related projects broken down into various items, such as gymnasium bleachers, running tracks, weight rooms, and football field lighting.

Robin Turner, a volunteer for the "Citizens for Lansing Schools," an advocacy group formed in 2003 to support the bond, said that even though she suspects that the money won't necessarily go where she'd understand it to go, she still supports the objective of the bond. "I don't look to micromanage where they're going to put this, because frankly I don't think it's enough anyway."

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