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Crowd hears White Lake school details

Engineer Doc Smith of EDS Builders reviews White Lake referendum plans Tuesday.

Oct. 19, 2011

White Lake voters arrived in the school cafeteria Tuesday hungry for information about the school's upcoming building and spending referendum.

They got platefuls, which they must now digest prior to the Nov. 8 vote.

About 75 people crowded into the school for the first large-scale public presentation on the two-pronged plan. It includes a \$2.995 million building component and would also authorize the district to spend \$200,000 annually above state-imposed limits for the next three years to cover operational expenses.

"It's great to see such a fantastic turnout," Board President Scott Popelka said.

The session was held in conjunction with the district's annual meeting, which typically draws only a handful.

"It's every superintendent's wish to have an annual meeting and have this many people show up," District Administrator Bill Fisher said.

Fisher walked the crowd through a "virtual tour" of the school's seven-decades-old gymnasium, technical education area, restrooms and locker facilities, which he called woefully inadequate.

"Space is the re-occurring theme," he said. "This was designed 73 years ago, and it stands to reason things have changed."

The administrator said that the plan, developed by an ad hoc referendum committee, addresses the district's most pressing facility needs, and may help the district retain and perhaps even grow enrollments.

"Programs and facilities determine numbers," he said.

Engineer Doc Smith of EDS Builders noted that the district has made a concentrated effort over the past several years to update the facilities, heating and ventilation units and improve energy efficiency, including demolition this past summer of the 1918 building that stood at the core of the complex. It's now the gymnasium's turn, he said.

"It's the greatest need now because they have already corrected the other problems methodically," Smith said.

Lisa Voisin of Robert W. Baird & Co., the district's financial consultant, said the district has a unique "window of opportunity" to correct glaring facility needs at no additional tax impact to residents.

She explained that, if the building and spending questions are both successful, property owners will pay \$11.85 per \$1,000 of equalized valuation in taxes, which is still 14 cents lower than now.

That lack of impact is due to a dramatic drop in school spending, propelled in part of reductions at the state level. Without the referendum, the rate would tumble \$2.78, to \$9.21 per \$1,000.

"This is a no-impact referendum," she said. "The taxes ultimately go down even with a successful vote. They would go down even more without the referendum."

When the board earlier this year approved moving forward with the vote, officials stressed that it was due to the ability to get the improvements made without increasing taxes beyond current levels.

Voisin added that the stagnant economy also has created bargain interest rates, which she anticipated

would be between 3 and 4 percent over the 20-year life of the bond.

The referendum includes two separate questions. The first will ask voters to approve bonding \$2.995 million for the building addition and community recreation center. The second authorizes the district to spend \$200,000 annually above and beyond state-improved revenue limits for the next three years. That would replace a voter-approved revenue cap override of \$250,000 annually for five years that has just expired.

The actual building carries a price tag of \$3.58 million, with the balance of the project financed through the district's fund balance, a move that will save \$325,000 in interest and reduce the tax impact.

It includes a community recreational center, complete with exercise room, a central commons area, locker rooms, concessions and a new gymnasium. There would also be remodeling of the existing locker room and shop areas, parking and playground improvements and exterior sidewalks.

The new area would extend from the existing gymnasium along Center Street.

Mike Wild, a member of the ad hoc referendum committee, said it is time for the voters to make an investment in the school, which serves as the hub of the entire community.

"I have to ask, 'can I stay here if my kids don't have the same quality as other kids in other schools?' I don't want to leave," he said. "We have the best people in place. We have the best administrator and the best staff. We can't do any better than this. Why would be quit now?"

The remark drew extended applause.