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Wall BOE makes case for \$66M in school improvement bonds

Voters to decide in Tuesday, Dec. 13 referendum

BY COREY ROTHAUER
THE COAST STAR

WALL TOWNSHIP — Ahead of the Dec. 13 bond referendum for Wall Township Public Schools, the Board of Education hosted a special meeting Tuesday night where they presented a video and brought professionals from the Spiezel Architectural Group, Inc. to present the various improvements the district is eyeing.

The entire presentation and video from Tuesday night's meeting, which details

the improvements and outdated equipment, including photo references, is available through the BOE's website under the referendum tab.

The BOE also stated that any question on the referendum could be sent to vision@wallpublicschools.org.

Voters will say yes or no to two questions: one is \$53.1 million for the "highest priority" projects. Question 2 is contingent on question one passing and asks voters for an

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additional \$13.1 million [\$66.2 million in total] containing other improvements deemed less critical.

According to Steven Spiezel, architect for Spiezel Inc., his firm identified roughly \$235 million in needed improvements. But, he adds that their main priority was "to figure out how much we can possibly do and package this to get the highest priority needs all in the question that's gonna cost the taxpayers nothing."

QUESTION ONE

According to the BOE, the bond referendum is separated into two questions due to each one's impact on property tax on the average assessed home in the township [\$483,357].

The BOE states that question one alone has no tax impact due to the retiring of debt in the 2023-2024 fiscal year.

Regarding question one, Mr. Spiegel stated, "We'll move forward with no tax impact, just moving the debt that's falling off, taking on the new debt, and you're able to upgrade \$53.1 million."

According to the BOE, the current annual debt service payment for the average assessed home is \$185 [\$15.50/month] or \$0.038 per \$100 of assessed home value.

Additionally, the board states that the projected annual debt service payment for the average

assessed home, if only question one is approved, is \$179.38 [\$14.95/month] or \$0.037 per \$100 of assessed home value.

The NJ DOE approved all projects in question one for 34% debt service aid, including HVAC, electrical, fire alarm, classroom alterations, bathroom alterations, roofing and windows throughout the district.

Chair of Finance and Facilities, and Vice President of the BOE, Adam Nasr, described the improvements in question one as "Ventila-

tion, heating systems that are much more energy efficient, Electrical systems that can keep up with today's energy demands, roofing with better insulation and no leaks in high school classrooms and auditorium, current technology and restrooms with modern features that can accommodate people with disabilities."

According to Spiezel Inc., two of the items that came up almost in every building during their initial needs assessment were some level of roofing. The district installed much of the schools' roofing around 1999 and had a 20-year warranty, so any leaks or repairs needed are now coming directly out of the district's pocket.

The specific HVAC upgrades listed in the presentation include unit ventilator replacements, fan coil replacements, boiler replacements and rooftop unit replacements.

Specific electrical upgrades listed on the presentation include replacing main building service, distribution panels and sub-panels.

Additionally, fire alarm upgrades include replacing fire alarm systems with fully addressable systems; which can accurately identify where the active fire is for first responders.

QUESTION TWO

Should voters also say yes to question two, the BOE claims that debt service payment for the average assessed home would be \$60 annually [\$5/month] or \$0.012 per \$100 of assessed home value.

"At the end of the day, when you look at the math, it works out to be about \$5 a month for the average tax assess home [\$483,357], so if your house is worth less than that, the impact would be less. If it is worth more, your impact would be more, but that's the average of the tax success home. With that, we did get 34% funding on 5.9 million worth of those projects. A lot of those upgrades are not funded through state aid which is why they show

up on question two," said Mr. Spiegel.

Within the additional \$13.1 million in improvements asked by question two, the NJ DOE approved \$5.9M for 34% debt service aid, including more HVAC, ADA Site Upgrades, Art Classroom Renovations and Windows throughout the district.

According to Mr. Nasr, improvements in question two include upgrades to the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems at Old Mill and West Belmar schools. Window replacements at the intermediate school and parking lot improvements at Allenwood and West Belmar, in addition to art room renovations at the high school.

According to Spiezel Inc., the parking lot for Allenwood Elementary would be about 50,000 sq ft of parking space located adjacent to the existing parking lot towards the back fields.

The remaining \$7.6 million of projects are considered ineligible for debt service aid which includes some paving and athletic projects.

ATHLETIC IMPROVEMENTS

Superintendent Tracy Handerman clarified the improvements to athletic facilities that are not covered by state aid, stating, "Question two's projects focus on athletic facilities at the high school. Our physical education classes use them every school day. Student-athletes use them after school most days, and community members participate in events there regularly. The stadium track and fields are key resources for the wall community. A turf field would expand the number of sports that could efficiently use that space, and it would expand the time that it can be used."

The specific athletic facility improvements listed in the presentation include a re-grade of existing High School athletic fields, artificial turf, field drainage improvements at High School, renovations to the existing track at the High School, new field lighting at the High School football stadium.

BOE president Ralph Adonizio brought up the problems with high school track, "I believe it was this past summer, we added some topsoil to it because you couldn't walk on the field after it rained. I mean, it was a swamp, and the other issue is the water doesn't run off the track correctly. In regards to the track itself, I believe we haven't had an official track meet here at the high school in probably seven or eight years, because the track is just deemed unsafe."

WHAT IF REFERENDUM FAILS?

Without a voter-approved bond referendum, the BOE claims that high-priority needs will have to be paid for from the operating budget leading WTPS to lose the opportunity for \$20 million in state aid. Additionally, they state that local property taxes will cover 100% of project costs.

"Without the voter-approved bond, we can move forward with these projects, but they would have to come from some other source. You're likely not going to get \$53.1 million worth of work done without it, which means you're gonna have to pay over time every year, whatever you can afford, small pieces of projects being put together. The biggest thing you lose is \$20 million worth of state aid, that that's the big done," said Mr. Spiegel.

Mr. Spiegel further argued that due to the economy of scale, spreading the larger projects out through capital improvements each year would increase the costs.

"Everybody realizes we all pay state taxes. Our part of our state taxes go to the debt services to fund schools. So all of your taxes just went and helped pay for other referendums that just passed. So why not bring some of that back to Wall Township? You're paying for it, you might as well get some of it back," added Mr. Spiegel.

BOE CITES 'OUTDATED' FACILITIES

Mr. Nasr followed Mr. Spiegel by highlighting how outdated some of the equip-

ment is in schools, including boiler rooms, HVAC, fire alarms and roofing.

"Two of the schools were built before 1900. These are buildings that are designed the last 50 years, if they were built before 1900, we're already 70 years past the expected time span of the building. So instead of building new buildings, preserving the ones we have is what our goal is. Protecting assets is always a theme," said Mr. Nasr.

In the referendum video, Superintendent Tracy Handerman echoed Mr. Nasr's assessment of the district's outdated facilities stating that the newest building is Old Mill Elementary school which is 51 years old and that West Belmar Elementary was built around 1890.

Wall Resident Susan Pace asked why question two included renovating Allenwood school bathrooms to be ADA-compliant if it was for "lower priority" improvements.

"I noticed with all of the Allenwood question two improvements, bringing steps, handrails, ramps, et cetera to code and ADA code is part of question two. My concern is, why isn't that question one if we are trying to bring the school up to code, especially the ADA features of it?" asked Ms. Pace.

Mr. Nasr clarified to Ms. Pace that the consideration of placing certain improvements in question one as apposed to question two is more than just the priority of the improvement.

"Like what are our critical needs at this point in time?" said Mr. Nasr, adding, "If question two fails, and we had to absorb it into our budget, is going to cost the least amount of impact?"

He then stated that the ADA improvements to Allenwood would be easier to fund through a yearly budget should question two flop with voters.

"For the ADA piece, in theory, we could, if we had to absorb that and do that as part of our yearly budgeting process, it would be a little easier

than say, changing a boiler or a fire alarm system," said Mr. Nasr.

BALLOTS AT POLLS OR BY MAIL

Registered voters who are residents of Wall Township get to vote in the Dec. 13 bond referendum, which follows the same protocols as any election in New Jersey.

Voters should be aware of specific deadlines for this election and should expect fewer polling places than are available for primary and general elections.

In-person voting will be available to registered voters on Tuesday, Dec. 13, but the polling locations and times have not been finalized. When that information is available, it will be posted to the voter information tab on the district's referendum information tab.

If voters arrive at a polling place and are told they are ineligible to vote because they are registered to vote by mail, or for any other reason, they can request a provisional ballot. Filling out a provisional ballot preserves one's right to vote. Those ballots will be counted once officials have a chance to confirm eligibility.

TO VOTE BY MAIL

If residents previously applied to vote by mail, they might automatically receive a ballot in the mail for this election. The district says these people should be on the lookout for those ballots three to four weeks ahead of the Dec. 13 election.

To ask for a vote by mail ballot for this referendum, a voter's application must be received by the county by Dec. 6. Applications are available in English and Spanish. All vote-by-mail ballots must be postmarked by Dec. 13, or hand-delivered to the County Board of Elections. Those ballots will not be accepted at in-person polling locations. These applications can be accessed through the voter information tab on the district's referendum information tab.

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