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Yakima Valley school districts agree: It's tough to get a bond passed

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YAKIMA, Wash. -- The new Washington Elementary School in Sunnyside is a little more than six weeks away from ringing in the school year.

Contractors continue working on the exterior and interior, putting in finishing touches as the \$18 million project is in its final two weeks. Only a stone's throw away, the former Washington Elementary approaches its end, as the building is set for demolition before the school year starts.

Among some of the longtime Sunnyside residents, the end of the old building is bittersweet and filled with memories, Superintendent Kevin McKay said. That nostalgic feeling may be more felt by adults than children. For the 750 students projected for Washington in a few weeks, they get a new school.

“Kids are going to walk into this building in a little over a month or so, and they’re going to feel proud of what they have,” he said. “School employees will be proud, the community will be very proud of this new facility.”

A voter-approved bond, valued at \$10 million and passed in early 2014, is the primary reason Sunnyside has a new school. A \$23 million bond also is the mechanism making it possible for Naches Valley School District to have a new elementary school this fall.

The process of setting up, campaigning and passing a bond remains misunderstood, flawed and frustrating. However, as local educators and others argue, it remains the best option — among few — to upgrade or replace facilities in the Yakima Valley and across the state, as well as ideally improving academic performance.

“It’s a huge effort to get a bond up for a vote,” said Naches Valley Superintendent Duane Lyons. “You need to have sponsors, you need to have community effort, you need friends and neighbors to say it’s time to fix our schools.”

As is the case in schools in every region of the U.S., locally financed payment plans are the most common option to building new schools. According to the state’s profile as compiled for the report, “State of our schools: America’s K-12 facilities 2016,” Washington school districts paid 86 percent of K–12 capital projects with local funds. At the end of the 2013 fiscal year, these same school districts had a combined long-term debt of \$9.5 billion, or \$9,078 per student.

Nationally, from 1994 through 2013, an average \$49 billion was spent on construction projects annually, the report said.

Whether or not a state assists school districts financially when building or adding on to schools varies. According to the report, 12 states, including Idaho and Wisconsin, provided no state matches or reimbursements for school construction projects in 2015. Oregon was on the list before adopting a bond program late last year.

Washington provides aid to qualifying districts through state matches as part of its school construction assistance program. Just last week, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction announced it would make nearly \$317 million in state matching dollars available to 28 school districts. One benefactor was Granger, which will receive just under \$2 million to add classrooms and a multipurpose room to its elementary school.

School districts, however, are responsible for finding local funds — whether it be from cash reserves or putting up a bond request for a vote — to pay off the costs. Given general operating costs already overwhelm districts, the popular option is the bond route.

It is a long, time-consuming process.

In the East Valley School District, for instance, the first meetings regarding a \$53 million bond proposal, which ultimately passed in November, took place about two years before election day, said Superintendent John Schieche.

“You have to be careful in what you are asking voters to approve, that you have a very noticeable need,” he said. “It takes a noticeable need for a bond to pass.” In his case, the

demonstrated urgency was there, as the money primarily will be used toward expanding and renovating the high school.

Using bonds to fund school construction projects is considered unfair by some. The inequity is felt more in property tax-poor districts, such as in the Yakima Valley. Mt. Adams and Wapato, for instance, have a much more limited tax base because part of their boundaries fall under tax-exempt Native American lands.

Despite higher tax rates per \$1,000 in assessed value than urban or suburban districts, local schools just can't generate as much revenue from bonds or levies as neighborhoods in the Seattle area.

The higher rates are a result of districts trying to play catchup, said Jon Gores, a Seattle-based school bonds expert who has worked with local school districts on bond efforts. Seattle Public Schools could renovate "two or three schools" annually if they wanted to solely from levies, he added, but most districts do not have the luxury of such a large tax base.

"It's a system that tries to be equitable," said Gores, a managing director for D.A. Davidson, a financial firm that underwrites school bonds for several school districts. "The drawback is that there are a lot where they don't match."

The state's assistance in capital projects attempts to solve inequity. Margaret Plecki, a University of Washington educational leadership professor, said Sunnyside's recent construction program is one example that the state recognizes part of the burden of funding constructions projects for property tax-poor districts. Without the state's assistance, Sunnyside may have never found the money to build Washington.

But Naches Valley needed new facilities, too, as evidenced by its successful bond measure in 2014 to build Naches Valley Elementary School. The building replaces Naches Valley primary and intermediate schools, which Lyons said were built in the 1950s and outdated.

Because enrollment in the district has dropped, and its poverty rates aren't as high as others in the region, it must chip in more local money and increase the burden for taxpayers. That's because the state won't contribute as large a percentage of funds for Naches as it might for other districts.

Problem is, Naches Valley hadn't achieved much success in passing a bond — its last successful bond measure prior to 2014 was more than 20 years ago. As a result, the schools just grew older.

"There's a huge inequity in the system," Lyons said. "The state is supposedly trying to fix the system. In our building, we got a \$3.4 million match. If we were in a higher-poverty area, it would've been higher."

But even if there were no state funds involved, Naches Valley would have moved forward with the school project — changing the project’s scope or trimming costs if necessary, Lyons said.

For comparison, Sunnyside’s Washington Elementary project will cost about \$18 million — \$10 million from local taxpayers and the rest coming from the state.

In Sunnyside and in Zillah, McKay has seen both sides of the issue. Last year, Zillah attempted to pass a \$10 million bond that would fund a new intermediate school, but the district halted plans when it found out it wouldn’t get a state match.

The failure of a bond measure can take a toll. McKay said morale for residents and staff in Zillah wasn’t good at all after the abrupt news from the state only a few months before the election.

“It wasn’t like we had taken it out to the voters yet,” he said. “If you were to have that problem, and taken it to the voters and passed it and then you find out, it would’ve been a disaster. We were still at a relatively early stage...but there was some disappointment, some great disappointment.”

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