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Poplar Bluff R-I Kicks Off Next Long Range Plan with no-tax Increase Ballot Measure

JANUARY 17TH 2025 BY DEE LOFLIN

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Poplar Bluff Schools has an opportunity to expand its building capacity at Early Childhood, enhance safety district-wide and address deferred maintenance including the construction of a new bus garage, all at zero increased cost to taxpayers.

The R-I Board of Education voted to place a no-tax bond issue on the April 8 ballot, estimated to generate \$11.5 million. Board member Dr. Mike Price made the motion, which was seconded by Tim Gaebler and met with unanimous approval from Dr. Cynthia Brown, Ken Davis, Dave Elledge, Roger Hanner and Dr. Larry Kimbrow during a meeting Thursday, Jan. 16, in the Administrative Building.

“Due to the financial oversight and fiscal management of recent Boards of Education, the Poplar Bluff School District is able to offer this opportunity to our stakeholders,” stated Dr. Aaron Cornman, superintendent. “A no-tax levy measure, if passed, would allow us to service more preschool-aged students as well as improve the safety in all district facilities to continue to promote a secure learning environment, and focus on other priorities including ancillary services such as our Transportation Department.”

The 20-year general obligation bonds would be issued to extend the 18-cent debt service previously approved by voters in 2009 to construct the Kindergarten Center and perform extensive renovations at Junior High including electric, plumbing, and heating and air, recalled Maintenance Director Al Ursery. The district's operating levy is expected to remain unchanged at \$3.62 per \$100 of assessed valuation, which is lower than Cape Girardeau, Farmington, Jackson and Sikeston, and only 4 cents higher than Dexter, a neighboring district that serves less than half the student population, according to 2023 state reports.

"The last time you did this was in 2009, originally for almost \$5 million, and today you can net more than double, without raising your tax limit," Lorenzo Boyd, managing director for Stifel, Nicolaus & Company of St. Louis, informed the board last month. "I think this is a great opportunity."

With over 30 years of experience working with public schools, Boyd noted that Poplar Bluff has an A+ underlying credit rating and he typically does not see schools with a debt ceiling limit of \$83 million so far below their borrowing capacity, as dictated by the state. "Because of the fund structure, it's the best money for the least amount of cost to the taxpayers," added Charles Kinsey, R-I assistant superintendent of business.

Since the Kindergarten Center opened for the 2011/12 school year, over 300,000 square feet of academic space has been added across the district, significantly improving the learning environment for all students, grades preK-12. Phase two of Poplar Bluff's previous long-range plan was completed earlier than projected in 2020 – with the new state-of-the-art Early Childhood Center being paid out of district reserves, saving millions of dollars in interest, leaving space penciled in to expand on the Camp Road campus.

Currently, there are dozens of students on the waitlist at the Early Childhood Center, according to administrators. Considerations for safety enhancements across the district include a uniform electronic access system for doors, installation of bollards, vestibules, window security film, metal detectors and additional cameras. Lastly, the city deeded adjoining acreage to the district's bus garage over the summer, opening more options to develop the functionality of the Maud Street property.

While the April ballot issue focuses on the most pressing needs, the long-range plan will be designed to look ahead to the next decade, a process expected to wrap up in the fall. A larger citizens' advisory committee representing a diverse cross-section of patrons will meet next month to help guide the district in prioritizing future projects to focus on.

This past October, the BOE selected Dake Wells Architecture based in Springfield to produce R-I's next facilities master plan. A long-range planning committee comprised of community leaders and education officials began meeting in November after the professional planners completed walkthroughs of each school facility. "We can really improve some things by taking a few pieces away right now—or pruning—to make space for new construction," observed Matt Thornton of Dake Wells.

After soliciting needs from principals, the committee began its brainstorming process, identifying areas of congestion, campuses that could be made more cohesive, spaces that are not yet enclosed between buildings and other remaining projects not excluding finding the most cost-effective solution for the downtown property. Dille and Pollard are additionally designing a safe room for Eugene Field, pending final approval by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"You have to look at a 10-year plan as a living document that is not tied to any previous board or administration," said board representative Price, who served his first term on the BOE back when the previous bond issue was approved 16 years ago. "If you're not long-range planning, you're falling behind, and we have to keep the district moving forward alongside the community."###

Pictured: The long-range planning committee brainstorms with Dake Wells Architecture during their third meeting on Wednesday, Jan. 8, in the Administrative Building.

Articles submitted by Tim Krakowiak, Communications Director, Poplar Bluff R-I School District

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