

School bond proposal passes

Building work set to begin this summer with Shay demolition

By Harbor Light News Staff on May 11, 2022

By Kate Spaulding-Bassett
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A message on the Harbor Springs Public Schools signboard thanks voters for passing the bond proposal in last week's election.

While only a little more than 19.6-percent of registered voters cast ballots in the May 3 election in Emmet County, those who did continued their tradition of supporting school ballot initiatives, passing the Harbor Springs School District \$41.85 million, 20-year bond proposal, as well as both Char-Em Intermediate School District millage requests on Tuesday, May 3.

"We want to extend an overwhelming thank you to the community for supporting our kids and investing in our schools," said superintendent Michael Behrmann, during an interview on May 10. "We don't take this responsibility lightly. Being good stewards of our taxpayer dollars means ensuring these projects are done on time, and on budget. It's our job to make sure that happens."

The district's bond proposal, which will cover seven different components of facilities upgrades in the next decade, was approved with more than 65-percent of the vote: 1,227 votes to 798. Voters within the City of Harbor Springs— where recent tax-related requests have struggled— had a 34.4-percent turnout for the election and supported the school district's proposal by 56-percent of the vote, 232 votes to 182.



The current Shay Elementary School will be demolished and a new K-4 elementary school will be built as part of the \$41.85 million bond project voters approved last week. (Harbor Light Newspaper photo/Mark Flemming)

The seven components of Harbor Springs Public School's upgrade plans will touch every campus in the district. They include: completing Blackbird Elementary School's transformation into an Early Childhood Center dedicated to serving Harbor Springs' growing preschool and childcare populations; constructing a new K-4 elementary school to replace the Shay facility; upgrades and new infrastructure in Harbor Springs Middle School, maintaining it as a fifth-eighth grade facility; component number four calls for remodeling and expanding

Harbor Springs High School to serve students in grades ninth-12; component number five would improve the parking and traffic flow configuration at Harbor Springs High School; component number six would be to install synthetic turf at Ottawa Field; component number seven would provide updates and infrastructure repairs to the Community Pool to make it more useable/ decrease shut-downs due to mechanical failures. The Board of Education had a facilities audit completed in 2019 that highlighted more than \$40 million in what would be considered "critical" needs in the next decade. The elected group then spent several years in planning mode, working with consultants to review everything from future enrollment projections to what could be accomplished with the district's existing sinking fund. Once the board finalized its bond proposal, an extensive education campaign began to share the reasoning behind the request with the district community.

Now that the bond has been approved, however, the real work will begin. Superintendent Behrmann, who will retire at the end of this school year, said the district will continue educating the community on next steps and design plans. "In advance of the vote, the board did some prep work so that we could hit the ground running if the bond proposal was approved, and we were able to put out our Request for Proposal (RFP) for a construction firm out on May 4. That posting closes May 26, and we already have several experienced firms that have expressed interest in this project who really want to work in

Harbor Springs,” Behrmann said, noting the plan is to have firm interviews completed and a recommendation ready for board approval at the June 13 board meeting.

The district has contracted with Plante Moran Cresa to serve as their owner representative, and French and Associates will serve as the district’s architects. Both firms have extensive experience with school facility projects.

“Our architects are already working on a bid package for the demolition of Shay Elementary, which is our first project. We are hoping that demolition takes place in the late summer or early fall. That’s a pretty quick turnaround from our first series of bond sales (which will garner some \$16 million), but folks passed this bond and we want to do everything we can to make sure the work happens on time.”

Behrmann said the goal is to have the new Shay Elementary School open in time for the start of the 2024 academic year; 2024 will also be the second series of bond sales, when the other major renovation projects will begin to take shape.

In the interim, elementary students will be relocated to other district buildings. Plans for this will be announced soon, but Behrmann said it is likely second grade will be housed in Blackbird while the new Shay Elementary is being built, and third/fourth grades will be in the middle school. The superintendent stressed that the upper elementary students would still be separated from the middle schoolers while they eat lunch and have recess, and will not interact in their classrooms with the older students (by consolidating some spaces and programming, the district can temporarily make room in the middle school to accommodate this). “For the most part, their daily routines won’t be any different, their classrooms will just be in a different location,” Behrmann said, noting that middle school principal Heather Keiser and elementary principal Nathan Fairbanks are working closely together to make sure there is as little disruption to students as possible.

“We did as much preparation and planning as we prudently could prior to the bond proposal being approved, and I believe this will pay off. I am confident we anticipated a lot in advance of the election, so that we can have a smooth start,” Behrmann said.

In addition to the demolition work for Shay Elementary, the architecture firm is working to start collecting feedback and input for the design of the new elementary building. Behrmann said the goal is to capitalize on the last month of school to gather information from staff, parents, and the community. There will be several opportunities for public input during this design process, he stressed.

In addition to the Harbor Springs Public Schools bond proposal, voters in Emmet County also supported both Char-Em ISD millages. The first millage passed 3,920 to 1,911; the second millage passed 3,576 to 2,260. Pellston Public Schools also passed its sinking fund renewal 409-237.

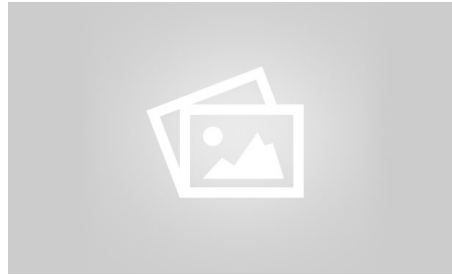
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