

Facilities in and out of focus in Dist. 86

Boards pursue some master facilities plan projects, set others aside over the past 20 years



By Pamela Lannom
plannom@thehinsdalean.com

How did we get here?

That question has come up repeatedly during discussions of how to address needed repairs and improvements at Hinsdale Central and Hinsdale South high schools.

“I think that’s a good question for the community to have an answer to,” Superintendent Bruce Law said Monday, acknowledging that the answer is complicated.

“There has never been a consistent approach in the district to keeping up with the infrastructure, keeping up with the maintenance, keeping up with all of the things you need to do to make sure both our buildings are sound, really, until the 2017 board came along,” he said.

Voters in Hinsdale High School District 86 will be asked for a third time to approve a bond referendum to pay for a variety of projects, with a new total of \$139.8 million, in the April 2 election.

Conversations about facilities are not new, of course. The district has completed at least three master facilities plans in the past two decades. The 2001 plan appears not to have addressed mechanical, electrical or other infrastructure issues such as roofs, Law said, based on what he’s read. He has yet to locate a copy of the plan.

“It’s all renovation and expansion,” he said. “It looks like overcrowding was more important than other issues.”

As a result of that plan, the district spent \$12 million in 2003-04. At Central, a new library and science labs were built, the student and faculty cafeteria were expanded and the library space was converted into eight classrooms and a hallway, according to a 2004 Chicago Tribune article. South gained six science classrooms and a greenhouse and the special education and deaf/hard of hearing area was renovated.

Another master facilities plan, completed in 2010, iden-

tified \$43.8 million in Priority 1 items, with the majority (\$39.3 million) allocated to HVAC work at both high schools at a cost of \$39.3 million.

The project list and price tag were subsequently refined, and the district ended up borrowing \$18 million in 2012 to fund the work, which also included four renovated science classroom, a renovated entrance drive and main entrance and a bus loop at Central and similar projects of South. Because the district was paying off a previous bond issue, it did not have to go to referendum for voter approval of the bond sale.

The second phase of the plan called for \$42 million worth of projects at Central, including a new natatorium, wrestling area and gymnasium and \$18 million worth of projects at South, The Hinsdalean reported in September 2011.

The second phase was never implemented, said former board President Kay Gallo, who served on the board from 2009-17.

“I believe it was the board’s intention to go and ask for a referendum — identify the next big group of projects that would sustain us for the next 30 years and go ask taxpayers, but then the board changed in 2013,” Gallo said.

Following the 2013 election, a new board majority emerged with a much more conservative approach to spending.

“That board then scrapped that MFP,” she said, noting that summer construction projects also were delayed or put on hold and a roof replacement program was essentially abandoned.

One of the decisions that board made was to pass a zero

levy, meaning the amount of property taxes the district collected in 2014 remained essentially flat. The loss of revenue at the time was estimated at \$1.9 million.

“Looking back — you could say this is on me — when the board did the zero levy, should I have gone in and said, ‘OK, we are going to cut the instructional program by that amount because we need to make sure we keep spending enough money on facilities?’ ” Law asked. “We placed a bet that CPI would come back and we’d have a full levy. We made the decision we were going to protect the instructional program.”

The consumer price index is the amount by which districts are allowed to increase their levy, or annual request for property taxes, each year. They also can take an allowance for new construction.

Because the tax cap calculates each year’s permitted increase on the amount collected the previous year, the \$1.9 million loss has compounded and now totals almost \$5.7 million. That revenue would be in the budget and available to help fund the \$42 million in life-safety, security and infrastructure projects the board has pledged to address even if the referendum fails, Law said. The board voted on \$3.1 million in cuts in December to help pay for that work.

“It almost feels like we’re paying for the zero levy now by cutting activities and athletics,” Law said.

He noted that the better decision is always evident with hindsight.

“It’s easy to cast aspersions looking back,” he said.

Even if different decisions

had been made following the zero levy, the district still would not have enough money to do all the necessary work, he added.

“You can’t cut your way to \$140 million,” he said. “You see what it’s like to cut your way to \$42 million. It’s brutal.”

No matter what decisions were made in the past, the board must address two key questions now, Law said.

“What are we going to do? And how do we prevent this from happening again?”

He and the board have talked about creating a committee to monitor construction projects now and keep an eye on district facilities in the future.

“I think this blue ribbon panel that we’re going to have when we start doing construction needs to be a standing community watchdog group to make sure D86 is not shifting money away from maintenance toward other things,” he said. “You cannot sacrifice facilities in order to have great programs for students.”

That long-term perspective is not always provided by administrators and board members, who come and go. Gallo underscored the significance of having new members, possibility with new priorities, join the board every two years.

“The boards are only together for two years,” she said. “It’s not four years, it’s two years.”



More than \$10.8 million in improvements were made to Hinsdale Central in the summer of 2012. (file photo)

Facilities talks more intense over past four years

District 86 board members and others have been talking about facility needs at Hinsdale Central and Hinsdale South high schools in earnest for several years. Here are a few of the more recent developments in that conversation:

2014

• **Dec. 1** — board votes 4-1 to spend up to \$85,000 to “refresh” the 2011 master facilities plan

2015

• **Sept. 14** — the master facility plan steering committee presents a plan encompassing roughly 94 projects at a cost of about \$200 million

2016

• **Jan. 21** — board votes 4-2 to approve a modified \$130 million master facilities plan, which earmarks roughly \$93 million for Central and \$37 million for South

• **April 18** — board votes 5-2 to identify \$94 million worth of projects as critical

• **July 11** — a citizens task force presents a \$92 million facilities improvement plan to the board

• **July 25** — board discusses a revised plan that totals \$79.9 million

• **Aug. 15** — board votes 4-3 against putting a \$79.9 million referendum on the Nov. 8 ballot

Please turn to Page 15

This and other election stories are posted online at thehinsdalean.com

NEWS

Facilities talks have been ongoing for years

Continued from Page 5

• **Sept. 22** — board discusses options to deal with growing enrollment at Central in light of decision not to go to referendum

• **Dec. 12** — board members review \$40 million, \$50 million and \$60-\$65 million options for an April 4 referendum

2017

• **Jan. 9** — board votes 6-1 to put a \$76 million referendum on the April 4 ballot

• **April 4** — voters reject the referendum 9,107-3,171 (74-26 percent)

2018

• **Jan. 18** — strategic planning committee convenes

• **Feb. 21** — new facilities community task

force convenes

• **March 21** — task force approves list of projects totaling \$184 million to recommend to board

• **April 9** — task force reports to the board

• **May 21** — board votes 6-0 to approve strategic plan

• **June 18** — board votes 5-2 to eliminate buffer zone

• **Aug. 9** — board votes 6-0 to put \$166 million referendum on the Nov. 6 ballot

• **Sept. 17** — board votes 6-0 to draw boundary line that places 626 houses of the former buffer zone in the Central attendance area and 2,244 houses in the South attendance area

• **Nov. 6** — voters reject the referendum 17,461-14,731 (54-46 percent)

• **Dec. 17** — board votes 6-1 to put a \$130 million referendum on the April 2 ballot, with about half of the \$36 million in savings result-

ing from rebuilding the six-lane, 25-yard pool at Central in its current location rather than building a new 10-lane, 40-yard facility

• **Dec. 17** — board votes 6-1 to make \$3.6 million in budget cuts for the 2019-20 school year to pay for a projected \$42 million in needed life safety, security and accessibility projects over the next six years. The board has said the cuts will not be enacted if the referendum passes.

2019

• **Jan. 7** — the board votes 6-1 to keep the referendum at \$129.9 million and stick with its revised plan to rebuild the six-lane, 25-yard pool at Central in its current location

• **Jan. 12** — board votes 6-0 to increase the referendum amount to \$139.8 million, adding \$5.1 million to move Central's pool and about \$5.2 million to improve South's auditorium

New board members will face full agendas

Continued from Page 7

timeline and making sure the benchmark is being met," Carpenter said.

Preliminary conversations also are taking place about teacher contract negotiations. The current contract between the district and the Hinsdale High School Teachers Association expires in 2020.

Lawmakers in Springfield could make things even more interesting, Superintendent Bruce Law said.

"You never know what the legislature is going to do about pensions and cost shifting," he said, noting that the district contributes to teachers' pensions but the state handles and funds the pensions after teachers retire.

"It's always hanging over our head because the pension situation in Illinois is unsustainable," he said. "Something is going to have to give at some point."

Pensions aren't the only area where the state legislature could have an impact.

"Other threats the legislature might

pose to us financially — who knows?" Law asked.

Of course he and others watching Springfield know a property tax freeze lasting one to three years is another possibility that has come up for discussion.

"Financially that will be damaging for sure," Law said.

HINSDALE RESTAURANT WEEK

MARCH 3rd - 10th

Announcing the first ever Hinsdale Restaurant Week. Invite some friends to celebrate our town's thriving restaurant scene, featuring lunch menus starting at \$8 and brunch/dinner Prix Fixe menus from \$19-\$38.

PARTICIPATING RESTAURANT LIST:



9 W. First St
altamurapizza.com



114 S. Washington St
baldinellipizza.com



25 E. Hinsdale Ave
casamargarita.com



35 E. First St
fullerhousebar.com



40 Village Pl
giulianospizza.com



29 E. First St
harryandeddies.com



777 N. York Rd
huatinghinsdale.com



8 E. First St
ilpoggiolohinsdale.com



18 E. First St
nabukihinsdale.com



13 W. First St
sweetalis.com



112 S. Washington St
vistrorestaurant.com



44 S. Washington St
wildgingerhinsdale.com

HINSDALEDINING.COM