



Some have suggested District 86 should rent space at the FMC Natatorium under construction in Westmont instead of fixing the pool at Hinsdale Central. But the facility, which should be completed in 2020, doesn't have space for Central's two swimming/diving teams and two water polo teams to practice there. (art provided)

## D86 disputes referendum 'alternatives'

*Board, superintendent say \$139 million bond issue is only practical way to fix schools*

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Hinsdale High School District 86 is asking voters April 2 to approve a \$139 million referendum to pay for improvements at Hinsdale Central and Hinsdale South high schools.

Opponents, some of whom say they would support a \$42 million referendum for life-safety, security and infrastructure improvements, have suggested alternatives to the measure.

User fees, renting pool space at another facility, using reserves and paying for construction with private donations are among those suggestions. Below is a discussion of each of those ideas.

### Institute 'pay to play'

What would it cost each student to make up the \$1.2 million the district will save by cutting 42 sports and activities at Central and a corresponding number at South?

It depends on how the number is calculated.

Superintendent Bruce Law reported Monday that a \$305 activity fee would have to be charged to each District 86 student (except for those who qualify for fee waivers) — whether they participate in any sports or activities — to make up the \$1.2 million.

Another way to calculate user fees is by looking at the cost per athlete, based on the total cost of the sport and the number of participants. The highest cost per athlete at

Central is \$1,764 for softball, with 23 participants, based on documents the board reviewed Dec. 17. Football, with 179 participants, has a per-student cost of \$725. The lowest per-student cost is bass fishing at \$63.

Activities fees would be \$1,156 per student for chess team members on the higher end and \$162 for poetry club members on the lower end.

Board member Nancy Pollak worries what user fees would mean for families who struggle financially.

"These opportunities should be available to all students no matter what your economic level is," she told The Hinsdalean. "I have a lot of friends and people I know who had a hard time just covering the incremental costs associated with the sports. 'This is going to be an additional burden,' Pollak continued, "and I'm afraid there are going to be a lot less opportunities if there is pay to play."

### Rent pool space

The new 60,000-square foot FMC Natatorium in Westmont, with a nine-lane, 50-meter pool and seating for 1,200, sounds like a great place for the Hinsdale Central and Hinsdale South swimming/diving and water polo teams to practice and compete once it opens next year.

Except that it's not available.

District 86 representatives first brought up the idea more than a year ago, said Larry

Forsberg, Westmont's economic development partnership director.

"Considering the use of the pool and the schedule of the pool, it didn't seem like it would be a practical option," Forsberg said. "It has been discussed many times over. Unfortunately it was not a viable option."

Even if another facility were available, scheduling practices there would be a challenge, said Bob Barber, varsity coach for the boys and girls swimming/diving teams at Central.

"Just to treat these kids like high school students on an offsite facility, they would be very challenged to commute and train at the level that we currently offer," Barber said.

His teams and the boys and girls water polo teams typically practice five to six days a week. Practicing at another pool likely would limit the number of students on the teams and increase the cost of participation. And other pools simply aren't available.

"People are building \$20 million facilities because there isn't enough water," Barber said. "We wouldn't be able to find water that doesn't exist, either."

### Find money elsewhere

If the referendum fails, the board plans to make budget cuts and issue working cash bonds over the next six years to pay for \$42 million in life-safety, security and infrastructure projects at the two high schools.

Board members in December identified \$3.6 million in budget cuts, including the \$1.2 million in cuts to sports and activities, \$1.6 million in staffing by increasing average class sizes, \$817,000 by trimming administrative and education support staff and \$337,000 in transportation. Additional cuts would have to be made each year through 2024-25 to pay for all of the work.

Some have suggested the board use the \$16.8 million it has in reserves, but that would put the district on shaky financial ground, finance committee Chairman Kevin Camden told The Hinsdalean.

"Once they are gone, they are gone," he said. "God forbid we do ever have some sort of emergency, we have nothing."

The Property Tax Extension Limitation Law limits the amount taxing bodies can request each year through the annual levy, and it does not provide a mechanism to save money — or replenish reserves. PTELL, as it is more commonly known, also prevents the district from exceeding the amount of nonreferendum debt it had when it was enacted in 1994. That means how much the district can borrow is regulated, too.

If the district had been deeper in debt at that time, it would have the opportunity to borrow more now, Camden noted.

"When PTELL was passed and came into existence, the districts that had a significant amount of outstanding debt



ironically fared better," he said. "It practically closed the door on us going out (to borrow) significant funds."

District 86 is not alone, he said. The tax cap is structured so that districts ask voters to approve borrowing when needed.

"We don't have a spare \$139 million available to do the improvements, but that means we're like every other school district," Camden said. "We have no other way to do it."

### Get private donations

Another option that has been suggested is to ask families to fund facilities through private donations.

Pollak said she's heard rumors about people willing to donate money for the pool, but she's never seen any evidence. Given her work with the Hinsdale Central Foundation and D181 Foundation to try to raise money, she believes raising private funds is easier said than done.

"It sounds great — 'Get somebody else to pay for it with donations.' It's not always that easy," she said. "I don't think you can rely on that to solve your funding."