

Rehabs under way in nearby districts

Elmhurst, Downers Grove, Maine Township passed significant bond referendums in 2018

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The list of projects sounds familiar.

Improve safety and security. Address maintenance and infrastructure needs. Update classrooms. Improve swimming pools. Reconfigure student services.

These are among the upgrades awaiting several suburban schools following voter-approved bond referendums last year, all in excess of \$135 million, in Elmhurst Unit District 205, Downers Grove High School District 99 and Maine Township High School District 207. (see sidebar).

Voters in Hinsdale High School District 86, however, rejected a \$166 million referendum in November. A \$76 million referendum in April 2017 also failed, all backdrop to the \$139.8 million measure in the Tuesday, April 2, election.

District 205 board President Kara Caforio said about four years ago the district launched Focus 205, a community engagement process to examine various components of the district, including facilities. The allotted time frame was one year.

"We found that the community needed some more information and wanted to have more discussion on all topics, not just the facilities," Caforio said.

Soon the district had a new master facilities plan that was reviewed in depth by the board and at community information sessions. Four scenarios were developed, ranging from the least expensive for only essential projects to the most costly that encompassed the entire vision.

"The community was able to see what would be accomplished in each scenario and what the impact to each taxpayer would be in each scenario," she said.

The \$168.5 million plan put to voters Nov. 6 was the most expensive of the four.

"That was the top of the line," said Bev Redmond, executive director of communications.

One factor working in the district's favor was that the retirement of significant amount of existing district debt meant a minimized impact on taxpayers.

"There wasn't much difference between the two scenarios that achieved the most for the district," Caforio said. "The community really overwhelmingly in those sessions said, 'Just go for it all because the difference is fairly small.'"

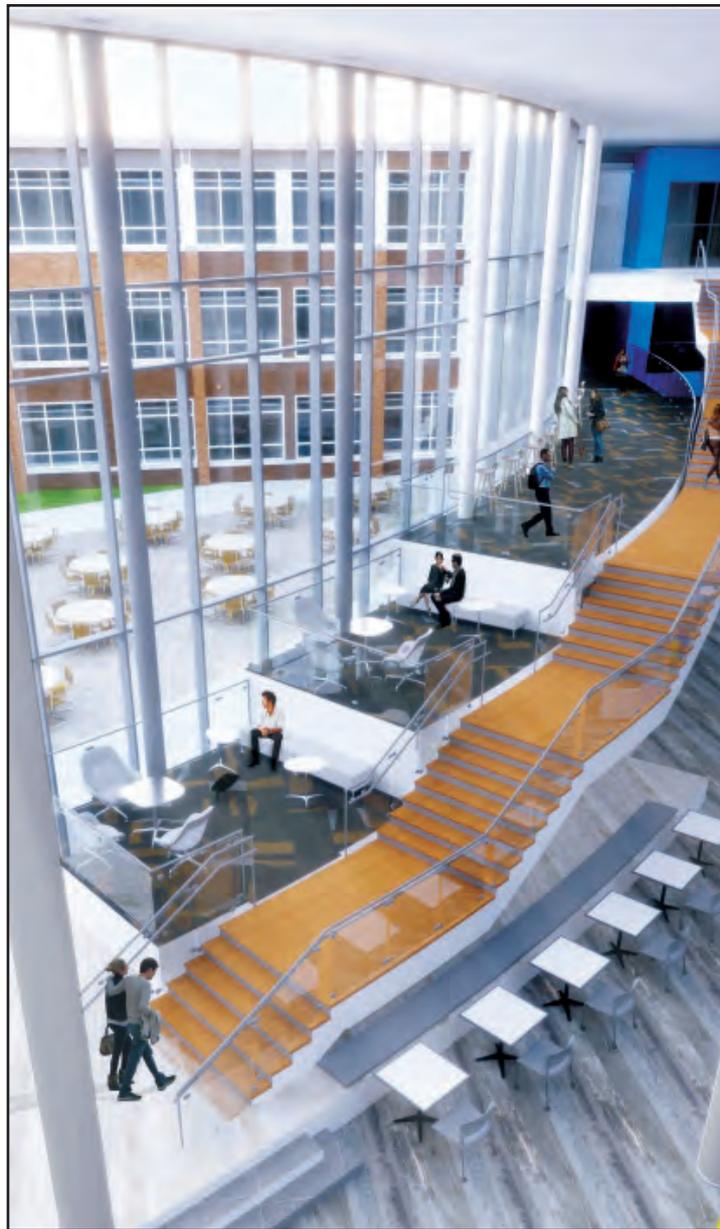
The owner of a \$500,000 home would pay only \$150 more a year, compared to \$800 a year if the debt had not been retired.

Like District 86, District 205 reached out to residents in a phone poll. Results showed support for the referendum in the upper 50 percent; it would pass with 62 percent. The exercise also provided some valuable information.

"We learned that people in the beginning of the phone poll weren't as supportive, but as they got just information in the phone survey, their approval went up just after five or 10 minutes of questions and getting information," she said.

District officials worked to disseminate information about the referendum and residents organized a committee to support the measure, Yes for D205 New School Referendum. The group spent almost \$31,000 on newspaper and magazine ads, a website, lawn signs and mailings. No organized opposition existed, Redmond and Caforio said, although a series of robocalls with erroneous information went out before the vote.

"By that time, I would say the community was pretty well informed," Redmond said. "They had already received quite a bit of information from us that really did offset or nullify any opposition coming from those robocalls."



This rendering of the Downers Grove South High School collaborative staircase in the Learning Commons was prepared by Wight and Co. for a January master facilities plan update to the District 99 Board. District voters approved a \$136.6 million referendum in March 2018 to pay for a variety of projects at the district's two high schools. (photo provided)

Only a small portion of the funds were earmarked for York High School, which was extensively renovated following a bond referendum in March 2000. The community also approved two ballot questions in March 2006, one for additions at each elementary and middle school and the other to increase the tax rate by 30 cents.

In Maine Township District 207, the process leading up to its Nov. 6 referendum followed a similar pattern, according to Brett Clark, communications director. A 2012 master facilities

plan focused on infrastructure was expanded after a review by architects, then vetted by a community task force made up of 40 residents. A phone survey indicated 58 percent would support the \$195 million bond issue. The measure passed with 61 percent of residents voting yes.

The funds, roughly to be spent evenly among the district's three high schools, are projected to add about \$350 a year for the homeowner of a \$384,000 house.

"Probably the thing they are

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Successful referendums

Elmhurst Unit District 205

\$168.5 million

Projects: build two new schools, improve safety and security across the district, provide space for all-day kindergarten, add future ready learning spaces at all school sites, meet other maintenance and infrastructure needs

Maine Township High School District 207

\$195 million

Projects: improve safety and security, repair and replace infrastructure, install new fire suppression systems, relocate and renovate special education spaces, improve health and wellness spaces (including pools), update food service and dining areas, update classrooms and labs at all three high schools

Downers Grove High School District 99

\$136.6 million

Projects: District — secured vestibules and new additions to house science, fine arts and culinary classes; large learning commons areas

South — new 1,250-seat auditorium, two new culinary lab classrooms, additional with visual arts suite and new science labs, renovated administrative center, renovated library and technology support areas, ADA-complaint outdoor bleachers and squad room and a second athletic turf field, improved main and west entrances and parking lot modifications

North — new and expanding kitchen and serving areas, renovated multi-needs classrooms, competition-sized gymnasium, renovated library, addition with visual arts suite and new science labs, ADA-compliant outdoor bleachers and squad rooms, reconfigured student services area, closure of west entrance circle drive and conversion of original gym to building services

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POLICE BEAT

Hinsdale police distributed the following reports Feb. 19.

DUI arrests

• Michael A. Slonek, 32, 5714 Ridgewood Drive, Western Springs, was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol and disobeying a traffic control device at 2:02 a.m. Feb. 16 in the 700 block of North York Road. He was charged and released to appear in court.

• Slobodan Trabuk, 25, 3312 Drover Lane, Darien, was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, driving with a blood-alcohol content higher than .08 and improper lane use at 1:44 a.m. Feb. 17 at Route 83 and 55th Street. He was charged and released to appear in court.

• Gregory W. Smith, 60, 237 N. Warwick, Westmont, was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, driving with a blood-alcohol higher above .08, improper lane use and speeding at 10:22 p.m. Feb. 16 at 55th and Quincy streets. He was charged and released to appear in court.

Businesses burglarized

The entrance doors were smashed at Hua-Ting and iDesign Salon, two business in Gateway Square at 777 N. York Road, between 5:20 p.m. Feb. 16 and 11:50 a.m. Feb. 17. The thieves took \$907 in cash and \$713 in checks.

Credit card fraud reported

Unauthorized charges in the amounts of \$23,400, \$53.11, \$261.47, and \$52.05 were made Jan. 11 on the credit card of a resident of the 5700 block of Astony Court. The incident was reported Feb. 14.

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most excited about is really this idea of making sure that our buildings are safe and secure," Clark said of residents. "We're going to create secure vestibules at each of our schools. That seemed to be something a lot of folks were talking about."

Organized opposition did emerge against the \$136.6 million bond issue in Downers Grove High School District 99, which was approved in March.

The Downers Grove Watch Association, a nonprofit organization formed in 2001, opposed the referendum. Its website contains a variety of articles encouraging a "no" vote. As a nonprofit, the group did not file a report with the DuPage County Election Commission. The group did not reply to a request for additional information.

On the vote yes side, Citizens in Support of District 99 High School spent about \$5,800 on yard signs and a mailing. The measure, fore-

cast to add \$113 a year to the tax bill of a \$500,000 home, passed with 62 percent of the vote.

District efforts included hosting "lunch and learn" sessions for staff, updating students and families via regular newsletters and emails, creating a 40-member citizen task force to vet plans, mailings, school tours and information sessions and a website, said Jill Browning, communications director.

"Security enhancements, ADA improvements and updating classrooms were the most supported projects according to our research," she said. "And air conditioning!"

District 205's Redmond emphasized that every community is different when it comes to passing a referendum.

"As many lessons as you can learn, they will be generalities," she said. "The specifics will be that the schools have to know their communities and the communities' priorities."

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