

East Lansing Citizens School Forum

The East Lansing Citizens School Forum convened on January 5, 2012, to consider the controversial school bond proposal slated for the Feb. 28 ballot, proposed bond expenditures, and possible alternatives for our community. The event provided a venue for public consideration of key concerns with the current bond proposal and integration of broad community input toward the development of a successful solution for East Lansing. The following report represents a summary of the information and recommendations developed as a result of this dialogue.





ELPS Bond Proposal: The \$53M Question

On January 5, 2012, East Lansing citizens gathered for a public forum to discuss the proposed \$53M school construction bond and subsequent closure of internationally acclaimed elementary school, Red Cedar. As a result of extensive review of relevant research, data, and public testimony, the East Lansing Citizens School Forum collectively recommend voting "NO" on the school construction bond appearing on the Feb. 28 ballot. We also commit to taking the necessary steps to articulate a quality spending plan for ELPS that focuses on fiscally responsible investment in all neighborhood schools, improving student achievement, and prioritizing the future of all East Lansing children and the community as a whole.

Lack of Fiscal Responsibility



East Lansing citizens are concerned about approving a 40-year debt for resident households when the mean value of homes in our community has decreased by almost \$40,000 since 2007. Also concerning is the financial analysis of the \$53M bond proposal by a group of MSU economists indicating the school district will realize no cost savings as a result of the plan. The bond proposal appearing on the ballot reflects a rushed decision by a slim majority of the school board in an effort to capture a bonding capacity that is based on inflated historic property values. **The \$53M bond proposal also limits the opportunity for other ELPS construction or technology investments until almost 2050.**

Fewer Neighborhood Schools



A "yes" vote on this bond proposal will result in the closure of Red Cedar, a high performing, fully enrolled neighborhood school. The current school board resolution, supported with proposed bond funds, will cause over 277 children to lose access to a neighborhood school, more than doubling the number of children in EL that lack a walkable school. Despite having the largest increase in school age children per building over the past decade, the area including Spartan Village, the Flower Pot and Ivanhoe neighborhoods would be left without even one neighborhood school. **This bond proposal damages rather than invests in walkable neighborhood schools.**

Access and Equity Issues



The bond proposal spends almost 20 million dollars in two schools within .7 miles of each other, but provides no investment for children in the southern area of the district, representing 25% of the school-age population. Children residing near Red Cedar School would need to be bused K-12. Sixty-five percent of the children losing their only walkable elementary school are also non-white students. Local leaders are concerned about the fact that sixty percent of bond construction funds will be spent within one square-mile in the district. **Rejecting the current bond proposal will allow for the adoption of a plan that prioritizes the future of all East Lansing children across the district.**

No Focus on Achievement



The current bond proposal does not seek to improve long-term educational outcomes for our children and risks a negative impact to student achievement in the short-term. Education research clearly disputes the assumption that new or larger facilities increase student achievement. The proposed new building configuration also does not ensure consistent class sizes throughout the district and will likely lead to increased split classes. **East Lansing children deserve a stronger proposal, based on strategies linked to improved student achievement, that controls for class sizes and ensures minimal impact on students during construction.**

Outdated Technology Plans



Most East Lansing residents support investment in technology, but also understand that technology needs change rapidly. Under the current proposal, our students risk being left with computer laboratories and equipment that will become outdated in a short period of time. As has been occurring at high performing school districts throughout the country, the trend is more toward mobile, wireless computing devices that are directly integrated into classroom learning environments. **A better plan for ELPS would employ a continual approach to renewing technology resources in schools, not a one-time influx of technology spending on fixed computer labs.**

INTRODUCTION

East Lansing has a well-deserved reputation for education excellence, at the K-12 and university levels. Our students excel, innovate and serve in an array of challenging environments. Public schools are an essential element of our community. We believe our students are worthy of considerable investment, as long as that investment produces a more effective and supportive learning environment.

By a narrow one-vote margin, the East Lansing Public Schools (ELPS) Board of Education recently decided to place a controversial \$53M school construction bond proposal on the upcoming February 28 ballot. If approved by voters, this proposal would result in up to 40 years of debt for resident households to support a plan that increases operational costs across the school district, closes a high-performing elementary school, and replaces 90% of five existing elementary buildings. Further, these buildings utilize design concepts that are not supported by educational research and that have been controversial in other mid-Michigan communities.

The East Lansing Citizens School Forum was created by a group of East Lansing residents to consider the bond proposal on the Feb. 28 ballot, the policies proposed for bond expenditures, and possible alternatives. Forum members hosted a public discussion on January 5, 2012, to consider the controversial school bond proposal.

East Lansing citizens in attendance consistently voiced the belief that we can and must work collectively as a community to develop a fiscally-responsible bond proposal that focuses on improving student achievement and provides for investment in all of our neighborhoods without passing a legacy of debt, disproportionate to property values, onto future generations. The following report represents a summary of the information and recommendations developed as a result of this dialogue.

Lack of Fiscal Responsibility



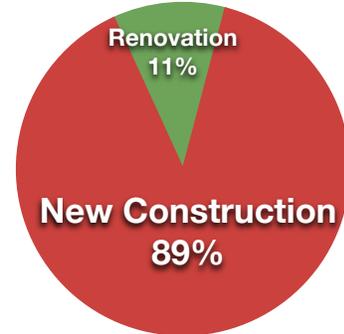
The excessive \$53M amount of this particular bond proposal will limit the opportunity for other ELPS construction or technology objectives until almost 2050.

East Lansing citizens are concerned about this expensive bond plan that proposes to build larger buildings in areas of declining resident student enrollment, within a compressed period of time, and requires significant expenditures from the district's sinking fund.

In total, the proposed plan will spend \$60M, \$53M in borrowed funds through the school bond and an additional \$7M from the sinking fund, to bulldoze and reconstruct 90% of each of five ELPS elementary school buildings, and add a new wing to the middle school. The resulting construction will actually create more square footage in the district than currently exists and operational savings are not anticipated. If enrollment drops in the future, all five newly constructed buildings will be unable to remain open long-term. This scenario has become a reality in several nearby communities, such as Grand Ledge, where a school construction bond passed in 2007 and two new elementary schools were closed in 2009.

The ELPS Board of Education is estimating a shortfall of roughly \$600,000 for FY2012, which is partly attributable to an 18% decline in resident student enrollment over the past decade. These realities of the current bond proposal do not put ELPS in an ideal position to compensate easily for decreases in enrollment or changes in state funding.

Percentage of Plan for New Construction vs. Renovation



Source: Tower-Pinkster/Clark Construction Project Scope Summary, based on square footage of buildings.

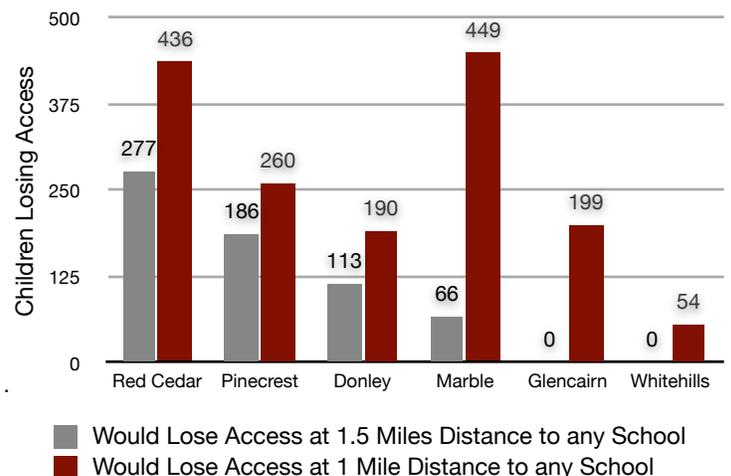
Fewer Neighborhood Schools



This bond proposal decreases access to neighborhood schools, with no operational savings and damages rather than invests in walkable neighborhood schools.

East Lansing citizens have clearly articulated the high value they place on children's access to walkable neighborhood elementary schools. However, an analysis of 2010 census data completed by the City of East Lansing's Department of Planning and Community Development clearly indicates that the proposed closure of Red Cedar Elementary School deprives 277 children access to their only walkable neighborhood school within 1.5 miles. The City of East Lansing's data analysis shows this number climbs to 436 children who rely on Red Cedar as their only neighborhood school when using a radius of 1.0 miles. With the current bond proposal projecting no operational savings, the community is faced with sacrificing a core value -- neighborhood school access -- for no financial gain.

Effect of Building Closure on Access to Neighborhood School (2010 Census)



Access and Equity Issues



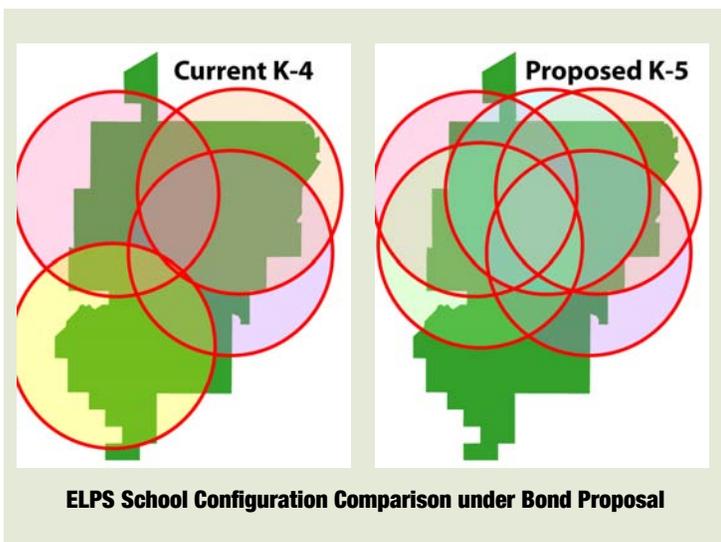
Rejecting the current bond proposal will allow for adoption of a plan that prioritizes the future of all East Lansing neighborhoods and their children.

The current bond proposal plan creates a highly unequal distribution of resources across ELPS that is in opposition to current geographic, demographic and enrollment data. East Lansing voters are being asked to approve a \$20M investment in two buildings less than .7 miles from each other, with subsequent closure of the only school in the southwest quadrant of the school district. Citizens and local decision-makers are concerned about the fact that 60 percent of bond construction funds will be spent within one square-mile of the district.

Thorough review of the documents provided by the ELPS K-8 Citizens Facilities Committee, historical and current information on building locations, and the 2000 and 2010 Census data, reveal demographic trends that do not support having all of the schools in the northern part of the district. The four board members approved the current bond resolution despite the K-8 Citizens Facilities Committee explicit request for the board to look at “growth trends, compared to school locations” (K-8 Facilities Committee Final Report pg. 13).

The area 1.5 miles around Red Cedar, scheduled for closure as part of the current proposal, now has 28 percent more children per elementary building in 2010 as compared to 2000, and 60 percent more children within a quarter of a mile over the same time period. The other 5 elementary buildings have seen declines of 10 to 18 percent of children per building within their same 1.5 mile vicinities. In fact, nearly 25 percent of children in the school district, as reflected in the 2010 Census, live south of Burcham/Centerlawn, but under the bond plan, not a single school would be located in this area.

The current plan invests tens of millions of dollars for some children, but nothing for others, particularly those in the Spartan Village neighborhood which already experienced a school closure within the last decade. Many East Lansing citizens believe, and economic development experts agree, this inequitable provision of education is not in the best interest of our community. In addition, the current plan’s inconsistency with district demographic and enrollment data will impact busing and transportation costs at the likely expense of decreased investment in the classroom.



No Focus On Achievement



Education research indicates that children in smaller schools perform better on achievement tests and that smaller schools helped to lower the achievement gap.

The Michigan Department of Education recently released their Top to Bottom ranking of Michigan Public Schools for 2011, based on all five tested content areas. The highest ranking for a K-5 elementary school in East Lansing was in the 66th percentile. East Lansing parents and citizens are rightfully concerned about the lack of focus being placed on student achievement, especially in relation to significant investments in infrastructure through the proposed bond initiative. The development process for this bond focused on facilities, without consideration of educational goals or the performance of students and teachers. East Lansing citizens want to invest in the education of our children, not just in facilities.

Many citizens are also concerned about the likely negative impact of this school construction bond proposal on achievement for current and future elementary students. Under the current plan, simultaneous reconstruction of elementary schools will ensure overcrowded classrooms, multiple building transitions, and inconsistent learning environments for our youngest learners through 2017. Concern about the impact of this aggressive school construction bond on student achievement is only compounded by a plethora of research indicating a negative impact of larger school buildings on student achievement. At the Forum, local teachers reiterated this sentiment in providing testimony that new, larger buildings had not aided student achievement in other districts in the region.

Outdated Technology Plans



A better plan for ELPS would employ a continual approach to renewing technology resources in schools, not a one-time influx of technology spending on fixed computer labs.

Most East Lansing residents have expressed a desire to invest in technology, but also understand that technology needs will continue to change and develop throughout this decade and beyond. Numerous citizens with education technology expertise have voiced serious concerns about this bond proposal plan that places our students at risk of being left with static computer laboratories and outdated equipment, with no significant opportunity for additional investment until 2050.

As has been occurring in high performing school districts throughout the country, the trend is for mobile, wireless computing devices that are directly integrated into classroom learning environments. Several school districts in Michigan have geared technology spending toward investment in such devices, achieving 1:1 iPad programs even in kindergarten classrooms. Yet, school bond plans for ELPS include static computer laboratories to be constructed in each school. One thing is clear - East Lansing citizens want to invest in technology, yet they want to do so in an informed and progressive manner.

A Better Plan for East Lansing



“The only real reason we are rushing to a decision tonight is because we are worried about “losing” taxing capacity if we don’t rush to a February vote.”

George Brookover, East Lansing Board of Education, 9/26/11

This poignant quote from a school board member regarding the current plan reflects a rushed decision by a slim majority of the school board in an effort to capture a bonding capacity that is based on inflated historic property values. The first step toward replacing this flawed effort with a stronger alternative is to vote **NO** on the current bond proposal, on the February 28 presidential primary election ballot.

If the February 28th bond proposal fails to garner support from a majority of East Lansing voters, the EL Citizens School Forum has committed to working with the ELPS Board of Education, City of East Lansing, Michigan State University, and other key stakeholders to develop an inclusive process that results in an alternative bond proposal and a better plan for East Lansing. In response to EL citizen recognition of the value of all our neighborhood schools and the building of community consensus around a school bond initiative, components of a better plan must include:

- A quality spending plan that acknowledges current economic conditions in Michigan, including declining property values.
- Integration of all existing elementary schools (Whitehills, Donley, Pinecrest, Glencairn, Marble and Red Cedar) into a district-wide strategy to attract young families to East Lansing, building a prosperous future for the community as a whole.
- Utilizing the mission statement of the ELPS, (“Nurturing Each Child, Educating All Students, Building World Citizens”), the strategic plan, and a focus on student achievement to drive decisions about infrastructure investments.
- Upgrading or rebuilding of elementary schools in a phased construction plan, based on age and particular needs, in order to minimize building transitions for students and to allow for ongoing analysis of district demographic trends.

- A focus on walkable neighborhood elementary schools, within a radius of 1.0 miles, for as many children as possible.
- Investment in integrative education technology such as mobile laptop libraries and tablet computers rather than the construction of computing laboratories, allowing for a continual approach to renewing technology resources.

A starting point for the development of a better plan already exists in a counter-proposal that was also introduced by Superintendent David Chapin on September 26, 2011.

Frequently promoted by East Lansing citizens as a potentially viable alternative to the current bond proposal, that \$37M plan includes renovations to all of our existing elementary schools at a substantial savings, relative to the proposed \$53M borrowing plan.

Superintendent Chapin’s multi-phased \$37M counter-proposal recommends rebuilding two neighborhood schools initially, with a subsequent investment in the remaining four elementary schools. Technology, mechanical, electrical, furniture and equipment upgrades (including air conditioning in all schools) were also included in this plan. The second phase of the plan would reflect ongoing collection of relevant data, status of public funding sources, and review of plans by the City of East Lansing and MSU to determine their impact on the growth of East Lansing schools. The plan would also consider property tax values, prioritize working in partnership with neighborhoods and businesses, move toward establishing K-5 elementary schools and improve technology across the district.

In fact, multiple, alternative plans have been discussed and presented by community members with experience in education, construction, technology and financing. Many of these plans demonstrate higher cost-savings, stand to protect and improve student achievement, would reduce the long-term debt burden, and embrace innovation in education.

For more information about how you can get involved in creating a better plan for East Lansing children and our community, go to www.supportabetterplan.org.

“(A) window is available to us for two or three more years and then it begins to change...”

*ELPS Superintendent, David Chapin
1/4/2012*

In Conclusion

After extensive review of information, data, and citizen testimony, the East Lansing Citizens School Forum collectively support voting "NO" on the ELPS school construction bond appearing on the Feb. 28 ballot. Due to the current bond proposal's failure to consider present and future economic conditions, lack of focus on student achievement, decreased access to neighborhood schools, unequal provision of educational opportunity, and disregard of the ongoing technology needs of our district, we recommend development of an alternative bond proposal within the next 6-12 months.

Along with a broad group of stakeholders, we commit to taking the steps necessary to resume dialogue resulting in articulation of a quality spending plan that focuses on fiscally responsible investment in all neighborhood schools, is geared toward increasing student achievement, and that prioritizes the future of all East Lansing children and the community as a whole.

East Lansing Citizen School Forum



The goals of the East Lansing Citizens School Forum are as follows:

- To increase voter awareness of the nuances of the bond proposal on the Feb. 28th ballot.
- To facilitate productive dialogue that leads to an alternative solution that is in the best interest of our community as a whole.

East Lansing voters have a proven track record of being informed and savvy enough to support investments in education without approving every proposal put forth for a vote. This forum is both a reflection of and a respectful recognition of East Lansing voter awareness.

Together, we can promote more community discourse and encourage others to vote NO on Feb. 28. Rejecting this bond proposal will allow for development of a quality spending plan for our school district. A better proposal, supported by community consensus, based on sound, objective information that addresses student achievement is what East Lansing needs and deserves.

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