

South Central Calhoun Schools held an open public forum on Thursday, March 8, regarding the upcoming VPPEL vote. Ron Speckmann from FEH Designs explained the thorough process that had led to the proposed project designs. This included gathering input from school staff, students, and community; prioritizing the highest needs; and identifying the scope of the work that would fall within the tentative budget. Mr. Speckmann described what new construction and remodeling work were being proposed at the high school and elementary buildings. School administrators Randy Martin and Nicole McChesney explained the educational and safety rationale for the proposed work. Superintendent Jeff Kruse clarified the different funding options, gave rationale for seeking a voter-approved levy, and provided data regarding the impact on patrons' tax rate. Board members also spoke about their understanding of and support for the project.

Following the informational portion of the forum, there was time for discussion. This provided for many questions from the public to be addressed.

“How is my vote an investment in the future of our district?”

A closer look at the levy rates for our district over the last five years show that patrons have actually had a significant tax savings. The level rate prior to the consolidation of the Southern Cal and Rockwell City-Lytton districts was \$13.79 and \$12.55 respectively. Sharing incentives decreased the levy to \$9.90. Even as those incentives are phased out, the levy rate is still only \$10.19. That's below previous rates, the rates of many area districts, and the state average. Even with the additional investment from this VPPEL levy, the rate will be lower than previous rates and most other schools. Another way to look at it is this: The amount that taxpayers have saved over the last five years is more than the increase they will invest over the next ten years if the VPPEL is approved. The SCC Board has been extremely conscious of the burden on taxpayers and has worked to keep it as low as possible while still meeting student needs.

“Why should I invest additional tax dollars to the school when I don't have kids or grandchildren who attend this district?”

Many of the social systems in our society depend on an agreement between generations to *pay it forward*. Just as previous generations in various communities paid for the education of your children and grandchildren, so now our generation in our communities have an opportunity and obligation to invest for the education of current and future students. Social security and Medicare benefits are other examples.

Investing in schools is also an investment in the communities the school serves. Maintaining and improving school facilities is critical to economic growth and community vitality.

“Why does the investment have to fall on property owners? Shouldn't it be more evenly shared among all patrons?”

This project to meet the current and future needs of students will require the district to borrow funds. By Iowa code, funds can only be borrowed from property tax revenues received. The Board always explores all options for funding and equitable tax distribution. For example, the Fine Arts addition that was put at the high school is being paid for with the district share of Iowa sales tax revenues. This loan will be paid off in four years, making it possible to fund future projects with this source rather than additional property taxes.

To provide a bit of perspective, about 80% of school districts in Iowa have already used the VPPEL levy to invest in their districts. By not having the same funding stream, SCC's capacity to make facility improvements is restricted, and that impacts both safety and educational programs.

“If this PPEL vote is passed, how much will my property taxes increase?”

The ballot states that the increase will be \$1.34 per \$1000 of taxable value. For property owners to determine the impact to their taxes investment, they need to know the assessed value (not market value) of their property. They need to then calculate the taxable value based on the rollbacks that are in place for residential, commercial, and agricultural property. A table is available on the school website to help patrons determine their individual increases. A homeowner whose house is assessed at \$100,000 would see an increase of \$5.67 per month. As one Board member stated, that's about equivalent to what it costs to take his family out to supper one time per year, a sacrifice that he finds to be minimal in comparison to the return on the investment. A farm land owner with an average taxable value for Calhoun County would see an increase of \$1.44 cents per acre. While this investment increase is not insignificant, it does need to be considered in the context of the savings that property owners have realized over the past five years and in comparison to the levy rates of area schools.

“What is the money actually going to be used for?”

The VPPEL funds would be used for two specific projects: the addition of a gym with parking and student service spaces at the elementary and the gutting/remodeling of the locker rooms at the high school. Rumors about plans to build trans-gender restrooms or a new building at the intersection of Highways 4 and 175 have no basis in fact.

“How could these two projects possibly cost so much?”

These plans are modest and basic. Nothing frivolous has been included. Because the project is being done by a public entity, there are additional regulations and costs. For example, it's required that an architect and engineer be employed, and there are costs associated with fire codes and accessibility.

“Why are we building a gym when we recently got rid of two perfectly good gyms?”

The biggest need for additional gym space is for elementary physical education and recess. The gyms in other town would not have met this need. The other need for additional gym space is for athletic practices. The costs involved in keeping a gym at a location where students do not attend class would have included making updates to meet Iowa code, building maintenance and utilities, and transportation to and from the locations. These costs would have exceeded the cost of a new gym. Many of these recurring costs would have come out of the general budget, with an impact on salaries, supplies, and programs.

“Why are we spending so much money on old buildings, especially the high school?”

At some point, the cost of maintaining and upgrading a building may exceed the cost of constructing a new one. This is not, however, the case with the high school. Following the tornado, it was thoroughly inspected and found to be solid. Many cosmetic improvements were made following the tornado, and many significant investments have been made as well. The fine arts addition, preschool rooms, weight room, air conditioning, and newly surface parking lot are examples. The high school is still a good building, and there is an obligation to our students to make it the best educational space it can be. It's critical to maintain and improve the buildings that are currently being used and will be used for many years to come.

“Isn’t this just all about sports?”

The project does include locker rooms and a gym, but those spaces are used by every student in the district. The gym at the elementary will make scheduling sports practices easier, but it will also provide an adequate space for physical education and recess for all elementary children. The locker rooms at the high school will benefit student athletes from SCC and visiting teams, but they will also be used every period, every day for physical education and personal fitness classes that are required for every student. These spaces will add value to both the academic and extra-curricular components of the educational experience at SCC. Not only that, but the refurbished locker rooms will also improve safety at the high school as these are the tornado shelters for the buildings and current have exposed hot water pipes and glass windows.

“Doesn’t the elementary already have a gym?”

The multi-purpose room at the elementary is used for breakfast, physical education, lunch, and indoor recess. State law requires 30 minutes of physical activity per day. It’s very difficult to meet that requirement when the weather prevents students from going outside and the breakfast and lunch schedule make the multipurpose room unavailable for 3 hours out of the school day. The only alternative is for students to walk laps in the hallways which is both inadequate in terms of exercise and disruptive to the students who are still in class. A gym that is a separate space would not only meet the requirements and needs of students in terms of physical exercise; it would also provide space for assemblies, programs, community events.

“If enrollment has decreased, why do we need more space at the elementary school?”

The elementary school currently serves about 340 students and employs 70 adults in just 55,000 square feet. Since its construction in 1965, more than a dozen academic programs and support services have been added, each requiring additional space. The needs of students have also changed. There are over 30 students who receive speech therapy, and this is currently being provided in a janitor’s closet. Students with physical disabilities are doing stretches on the library floor. There are no facilities to give students a shower if they have accidents or come from a home without running water. The school social worker and mental health therapist have no dedicated, private space where they can meet confidentially with children or families. There are no safe places where students with challenging behaviors can be alone or where students with sensory issues can experience the quiet and calm they need. Also, there are only 24 available parking spots for the 70 employees. This project would include adequate parking for staff as well as families and patrons who attend school events.

“Why aren’t we investing the middle school?”

The two projects that are being proposed were determined by the Board, with community input, to be the most urgent, but they will not be the last projects to be completed in our district. The Board has a long-term vision for the enhancing all facilities. Enhanced security, new technology, and improved learning spaces will be future priorities, including at the middle schools.