

District 15 referendum defeated by voters

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District 15's \$27 million bond referendum requesting money for working cash funds and building improvement projects was defeated by a 2-to-1 majority Nov. 2.

District 15 Superintendent Scott Thompson believes the defeat provides the district with valuable information about the community's willingness to get involved and voice their opinion on the matter.

"Despite having no organized effort to share information about the referendum with the community, over 10,000 voters showed their support for the school district," Thompson said. "I believe the referendum vote is information for the district to use to move forward."

Rendee Lewis, parent of a District 15 student, believes that new conflicts will arise for the district because of the vote.

"It is a shame [that the referendum did not pass]," Lewis said. "It would have helped if it went through, and [the lack of funds] puts more strain on the schools."

At first, the district did not intend for a referendum, but it became one when a group of residents called the Citizens for Accountability in District 15 circulated a community-wide petition. Over 7,500 citizens signed the petition to bring the issue to ballot, according to the Daily Herald.

In the spring, the school board planned to receive \$17 million in bonds for building improvements and another \$10 million for the more controversial aspect of the plan, the working cash fund. Mary Vanek, member of Citizens for Accountability, explains that the working cash fund provides no guidelines or restrictions for how the money would be spent.

"[Working cash fund] bonds can be used for any purpose," Vanek said. "There was no guarantee that any of the \$27 million would be used for capital projects."

Thompson explains that if the referendum had passed, he would have suggested to the board that they borrow \$16 million to fund capital improvements alone.

"Many of our buildings are old and in



Logue photo by Nick Palcheck

DISTRICT DEFEAT. Signs like this one, made and distributed by the Citizens for Accountability in District 15, expressed opposition to the referendum.

need of repair. The \$16 million recommendation was to take care of the needed upgrades on these buildings," Thompson said. "We have enough reserves to weather any unforeseen economical situations in the future. There was no need to create that extra \$11 million in debt."

Vanek believes the district would not necessarily follow Thompson's proposal to borrow only the suggested \$16 million.

Senior Iulia Gheorghiu believes that the whole \$27 million was not needed, but schools are still in need of more funding.

"I don't think it's necessary to have the full \$27 million, even though it would have definitely been put to good use," Gheorghiu said. "I don't see the benefits in taking away money from kids, and a smaller budget means less money per student."

Thompson aims to launch a new initiative called Navigate 15. Starting Nov. 16 at Winston Campus, meetings are planned so that communication between the district and the community will be more open.

"Navigate 15 is a series of meetings designed to bring together people from all segments of the community," Thompson said. "The goal is to study topics of interest determined by the participants and deliver a consensus about these topics to

the board of education to use as basis for long-range strategic plans."

Lewis explains the reason why, as a parent, Navigate 15 sparks her interest.

"If I can make the meetings, I will attend," Lewis said. "My son who is in kindergarten will be in the district for a very long time, so I'd like to be involved in having a say in his education."

With this year's budget allocating only \$1 million, the district needs to decide how to proceed with fulfilling capital projects. Vanek explains that the district needs to come up with a more responsible budget.

"In the past six months, the district never had a comprehensive plan for maintaining and repairing its 20 school buildings," Vanek said. "Last year, the district had several million dollars in projects budgeted, but much of this money was never spent, presumably because the district was counting on money from the bond issue."

Thompson explains the strategy that District 15 will use to proceed.

"[District 15] will use the information we receive from Navigate 15 to create a long-range plan to address the needed improvements to our buildings with the money we have available as we move forward," Thompson said.