

Woodstown-Pilesgrove eyes \$19.8M referendum with \$7.9M from N. J. grant

By **Brittany M. Wehner** | South Jersey Times On September 08, 2014 at 2:45 PM



WOODSTOWN — School district officials are preparing to ask voters to approve a new bond referendum to upgrade systems and classrooms in the nearly 100-year-old high school.

Two years after voters approved a \$9.9-million bond referendum, Woodstown-Pilesgrove Regional School District officials said that was only the first phase in addressing educational needs.

Now, district administration is preparing to ask voters to approve a bond for \$19.8-million during the November election.

While the ballot question would ask for \$19.8 million, the state would cover 40 percent through the NJ Regular Operating District grant — or roughly \$7.9 million.

The school district's local share would be \$11.9 million.

"We didn't include it on the last referendum because we wanted to wait for funding to become available," Superintendent of Schools Tom Coleman said.

The funding from the state is only going to be available for a short time, the superintendent added, and it is worth seizing the opportunity now.

To receive the state's money for building renovations, the entire bond referendum would need to be on the ballot. Then the district would save the \$7.9 million in payments received through the renovation process.

The 2012 bond referendum that was passed helped fund curricular-driven needs including the construction of the new Early Childhood Learning Center and upgrade of the agricultural science labs.

Additionally, a new multipurpose room was constructed at the middle school.

This year, the district administration is focusing on "Renovations vs. Preservation."

"Our guiding refrain was to 'Honor our Past,' looking to build primarily within our existing building, thus preserving that historic culture," Coleman said.

The last referendum came in on time and has reaped benefits beyond original projections, the superintendent added.

Since the district projects were completed, benefits have been evident, according to Coleman, with 9th-grade students taking biology lab and advanced college prep science with state-of-the-art lab rooms.

Also, the district hosted the National CASE Institute for CASE teachers from across the country and has seen an increased amount of instructional time at the middle and elementary school levels.

"There remains daunting infrastructure needs that need to be addressed in a building that will celebrate its 100th birthday this upcoming year," Coleman said.

With the ROD grant, the district will receive money up front, which will be used through the construction and work process, according to Woodstown-Pilesgrove Business Administrator Frank Rizzo.

"With our referendum we'd be getting the ROD grant and once we get that grant money, we would get it as we are building on the project. The state has the \$7 million set aside for us," Rizzo explained.

Every month, the state would send money for project funding as the district sends vouchers based upon bills, according to the business administrator.

The work in the high school would include a new HVAC system — air-conditioning, electrical upgrades, roof replacement, windows, doors, compliant auditorium seating, and necessary restroom renovations.

"The goal and purpose of the second phase of our initiative is to provide the much-needed restorations to our aging buildings with state funding support," Coleman said.

These upgrades will ensure viability and preservation.

A Referendum Community Committee comprised of administration, faculty, community members, and a representative from the school board will take lead in the referendum planning process.

Further information on financing and local tax impacts was not available at this time.

"We will be providing more specific information in upcoming months in the form of community and school meetings," the superintendent said.

There will also be open house building tours leading to a public hearing in late October.

District officials will be at the Woodstown Borough Council meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 23, at 7 p.m. to present on the referendum.

Then on Tuesday, Oct. 14, at 7 p.m., another presentation will be made at the Pilesgrove Township Committee meeting.



Woodstown High School sits with an anniversary banner to celebrate the building's 100th birthday coming up. (Staff Photo by Brittany M. Wehner)