

Clarifications | Misleading AGA Bond Referendum Postcard | 10.16.2018

On October 16, District residents received a misleading postcard about the upcoming school bond referendum. The District is committed to ensuring residents have accurate information. You can read a point-by-point response to the misleading statements below.

The postcard is misleading and inaccurate; it claims a \$64 million bond referendum. This is not true.

The total bond amount on the fall 2018 ballot is \$40.975 million. The bond will be paid back over 20 years, with interest. The total paid back over the 20 years will be \$60.3 million. The author intentionally exaggerates the numbers to confuse voters. The District is able to secure a more reasonable interest rate because of its AA+ (Double-A Plus) bond rating. Only three Minnesota school districts have a better bond rating than Northfield Public Schools.

“After 56% voted NO in 2017 on \$178 million proposal, NFLD school board now wants \$225 million: \$64 million now and about \$145 million plus inflation ‘in a few years,’ for a new High School.”

Again, the \$64 million figure is wrong. The referendum question on the November 2018 ballot does not include the high school. It includes elementary and security projects that constituents have told us should be priorities. Right now, any discussion about a new high school is premature. The District has a 10-year improvement plan and we are currently executing that plan. We will continue to engage with our community to determine a timeline for future priorities. \$145 million plus inflation is a completely fictitious amount.

“We can’t afford it. Real estate taxes would lurch over 2% of assessed value for a median priced home. Farmers in townships are not making any money. Housing is already too expensive.”

It’s difficult to predict the future, but we know that agricultural properties will be paying fewer dollars in property taxes in 2019 than they did in 2017 even if the District’s bond referendum passed. The legislature provided a credit to agriculture properties of 40% last year. The author has suggested real estate taxes would be more than 2% of the assessed value for a median-priced home. To our knowledge, there is not a statute nor a widely-accepted best practice model that would indicate this 2% threshold is problematic for a community like ours. Rather, it is evidence of a proud, thriving community that is investing in its future and building for prosperity.

“School board’s own survey showed “safety” as top concern but school board members (3 up for re-election!!!) refuse to consider 2017 alternative \$14 million plan to renovate the high school exterior including CCTV and remote door lock security.”

This statement is false and intended to mislead voters. The \$14 million plan refers to the District’s long-term facility maintenance plan. In accordance with the plan, the District invested approximately \$450,000 into the current high school, including new door locks on each classroom to make school lockdowns more efficient. In addition, the District has already completed the first phase of a modest renovation to accommodate a secure front entrance at Northfield High School. The secure entrance is scheduled to be completed in December. The high school already has remote door lock security on 75% of its exterior doors, and the building has had surveillance cameras in place and has for many years. For clarity, all building doors are locked during the school day.

The District also invested in updated locks on classroom doors at Northfield Middle School. Northfield Middle School already has a secure front entrance.

The District will continue to execute its long-term facility maintenance plan and make investments in common-sense security solutions. If the bond referendum passes, all schools in the District will have a secure front entrance. Other security enhancements at Northfield Middle School and High School will be funded with existing funding in the next several years.

“No current classroom crowding and less than 1% enrollment growth projected by school board in coming years.”

Growing enrollment is a reality. Enrollment has grown by 175 more students than projected since 2015. It is slated to grow by another 60 students over the next two years. With this growth, the District is faced with limited space to serve the influx of students. The proposed renovations and enhancements would ensure we're able to accommodate a growing student body and provide learning spaces where they can thrive.

Classroom crowding is a relative term. There are some families who would strongly disagree with this statement. While we are currently serving the students we have, we are out of space to do any other programming. Our early childhood programs are completely out of space and we are unable to serve families in need.

“Tricky plan to bump up the bonding by \$4 million extra bonding to “buy down” interest expense in early years. A little less now but more later. Do they think the voters are dumb?”

This statement is false. We've said it before, and we'll say it again. The voters are always right. We do not think voters are dumb, which is exactly why we are proposing this bond structure. The District is using \$2.6 million of the bond proceeds to pay the majority of the interest payments for two years. The net increase to taxpayers is \$1.2 million, not the exaggerated \$4 million the author purports. The District proposed a 2% increase in the total bond payment over 20 years to save taxpayers 79% in the first two years of the bond. After that two-year time period, some existing debt is retired. The relatively small increase to property taxes (\$27 per year for a \$250,000 home) stays flat until 2024 when debt-related school taxes are projected to go down because the Middle School building will be paid off.

The author of the postcard is intentionally misrepresenting the financial strategy.

“NFLD school board spending about \$20,000 taxpayer money each election to market bonds to voters.”

The District has a responsibility to inform voters about its funding requests on the ballot. The District also has to produce certain election materials required by the State of Minnesota. In 2017, the District also had required expenses in printing election ballots and payments to Rice County and the City of Northfield for assisting with the election process. The author intentionally misrepresents required and expected expenses as “marketing.”

“Bogus claims of shortages of Early Learning spaces in NFLD. Unfair government competition for the four licensed preschools which have space for an extra 100 preschoolers and would staff up to meet the need.”

There are many, many wonderful licensed preschools in Northfield. Northfield Public Schools continues to look for opportunities to collaborate with preschool and early childhood providers in this area. We believe this is extremely important to ensure students can be as successful as possible when they enter kindergarten and beyond.

The fact is: the District offers one of only two preschools in this community that has earned the prestigious four-star Parent Aware rating required to accept state-funded scholarships intended for low-income families. Increasing the capacity of our preschool will open up new opportunities for children who cannot otherwise afford a pre-K experience. This is essential if we want to close the achievement gap.

It's also important to note that the author appears to assume early learning only encompasses preschool. This could not be further from the truth. The spaces that we aim to provide will also increase programming and capacity for early childhood family education and early childhood special education.

The waiting list identified in the mailer references the waiting list for the District's licensed daycare program, not the pre-school program.

About the author

The “Association for Governmental Accountability” group responsible for the advertisement has established a post office box in Northfield to make it appear the organization is from our community. The truth is that the individual responsible for the mailer does not live within Northfield Public Schools district boundaries.

Further Questions?

The Northfield School District is committed to ensuring residents have accurate information to be informed voters on November 6. If you have further questions, please contact Superintendent Matt Hillmann at 507.663.0629 or mhillmann@northfieldschools.org.