



Assessment of Community Attitudes and Opinions Regarding a Possible School Bond Condensed Summary Report April 2017

Introduction

In fall of 2016 the TSD401 school board decided that it was necessary to consider floating a bond election in 2017. The purpose of this bond would be to raise money to address the urgent issues of overcrowding and aging facilities of the elementary schools.

Because recent attempts to float bonds had narrowly missed passing, and because the board recognized that both the general community and school staff had expressed concerns at not being included in recent school initiatives, the board decided to launch a project that would actively solicit staff and community input regarding a possible 2017 bond. It was hoped that this information would help the board propose a bond that met the interests of the community.

This project included 3 objectives:

1. Collecting attitudes and opinions of the community and school staff regarding a bond;
2. Gauging, and increasing, the level of understanding regarding the needs of the schools and the impact of a bond on property taxes;
3. Demonstrating the board's commitment to include the public and school staff in major decision making.

Two strategies were identified as the most efficient means to achieve these objectives:

1. Offer an online survey available to the entire community; and
2. Conduct a series of facilitated mall group meetings with school staff and community members.

Number of online survey respondents:

All respondents (aggregated) = 487	Tetonia respondents = 83
School staff = 67	Driggs respondents = 165
Always voted no on school bonds = 32	Victor respondents = 239

Number of focus groups participants:

- While all staff members were welcome to participate in the meetings, and some schools were able to schedule their entire staff's participation, due to practical constraints, some schools invited a limited number of staff, while others simply made an open invitation for staff to participate. In the end, all 7 schools participated, with 79 participants in 14 meetings.
- A total of 12 community meetings were also held, with 71 participants.

Executive Summary

This section of the report attempts to summarize the key findings that could be of most help in guiding the efforts of the school board in possibly floating a bond in 2017.

1. Trust

- There were pervasive concerns regarding the school district's (both the board's and the administration's) ability to communicate effectively, to involve staff and the community in planning and decision making, and with managing projects in a cost-effective manner.
- This has led to a common sense of mistrust and is a significant factor that erodes support for any school initiatives, particularly bonds.

2. Bond Support

- There was strong support for a school bond.
- Additional, perhaps critical, support could be gained if well researched cost comparisons were presented.
- Support could also be expected to increase substantially if school staff and the community were involved with planning and decision making in a systematic way.

3. Facilities and overcrowding

- There was broad recognition of the issues caused by aging and inadequate facilities.
- There was also broad acknowledgement of existing overcrowding in the elementary schools, as well as concerns about future growth for all grade levels.

4. Advice on how to float a bond

- There was a lot of advice on how to successfully float a bond. This both implies a strong interest in a bond's success as well as provided a store of good ideas.

5. Configurations

- There was majority support for keeping 3 local schools, although there was a strong interest in seeing the costs between a centralized school and local schools compared.
- There was no consensus regarding grade level configuration - there were strong opinions supporting both a K-3 model and a K-5 model. It must also be said that there were a large number of respondents that stated ambivalence about grade level configuration.

Recommendations

The findings of this project point to a number of action steps that could help the school board succeed in floating a bond in 2017.

1. Improve levels of trust with staff and the community.

At a minimum, identify and utilize a prominent and regular means of updating the public on the board's actions.

In addition, efforts on the part of the board to actively include staff and public input will be greatly appreciated.

Staff would also like to see communications improved, and an increase in their inclusion, regarding specific topics from both the board and district administration. These topics include: staff development, strategies for improving alignment, a decrease in apparently reaction driven activities, dual immersion, and strategic planning. This would also help address a common staff sentiment that they are being dictated to and not fully trusted.

2. Conduct a comprehensive cost analysis of improving elementary school facilities

There are three options that came up most frequently:

1. Renovations of existing facilities
2. Rebuild Driggs and Victor schools, possibly renovate Tetonia
3. Build a centralized elementary school

Participants requested that this analysis include items such as real estate (purchase of new land, sale of existing facilities), design, construction, operations, maintenance, impact on bussing, estimated costs of future expansion, and general timelines.

It is also important to include projections of costs/timeframes associated with anticipated growth that will impact the middle and high schools in the next 10 years. In short, everyone wants to know what to reasonably expect in the future.

Because of the strong interest in expanding the number of gymnasiums in the district, it is recommended that cost analysis also include 2 new gymnasiums.

3. Present a clear recommendation

Participants expressed interest in a recommendation that include a general design, timeline, means for including public comment, including staff input on design and revisions, and estimated tax bill impacts.

4. Listen to advice on how to make the bond successful

In Section 12, Small Group Meeting Findings, there is a concise list of suggestions.

1. Advice on how to make a bond successful

Curiously, even though it was never asked, this was the most common type of comment received, regardless of subgroup (over 28% of all comments). This appears to indicate a desire of participants to see a bond succeed.

The advice given spanned a wide range of suggestions, including:

- Change how people are taxed
- Improve marketing of bond and school needs
- Increase state funding
- Keep the public informed every step of the way
- Find other sources of funds
- Involve public and staff in design and decisions
- Be specific with solutions
- Raise enough \$ to fix problems
- Guarantee roofs won't leak
- Have a plan for the next 20 years' growth
- Include old buildings in plans/accounting
- Assure that money won't be wasted
- Compare comprehensive costs of various solutions
- Demonstrate value for dollars to be spent
- Create professional level print and web communications
- Give tours of the schools
- Advertise the woeful state of the schools
- Address the realities of school funding
- Coordinate tax increases with other taxing entities

Even if each of these topics cannot be practically impacted by the school board, it would be helpful to at least acknowledge these concerns.

This is a condensed summary of Bob Gammel's report presented to the TSD School Board on April 17, 2017. For the complete report please go to

<http://www.tsd401bond.org/>