

Make it simple for me – what does this plan do?

This plan addresses health, safety, efficiency and educational needs in our school district by replacing the current high school with a new Grade 5-12 building, allowing Rippleside Elementary to be remodeled to accommodate PreK-Grade 4 needs. Voters will have the right to decide on August 9th whether they want to pass a \$68.5 million bond referendum to fund this plan. Because of the expiring debt for recent construction bonds, the new impact on a property taxpayer who owns a \$100,000 home would be \$18.75 per month.

When completed, our district will have:

- Healthier buildings
- Safer properties, including better traffic flow and secure building entrances
- Full compliance with state building codes
- More efficient operations
- The flexibility to meet student and staff educational needs

Who came up with this plan?

A citizen task force, formed from invitation and by volunteers, reviewed the assessment information gathered over the past year and developed options. The task force's final recommendation was presented to the school board on March 29, 2016.

What process was used to determine the needs of the school district?

For the past several years, ISD #1 has been evaluating the investments that will be needed to maintain the quality of our school buildings. Some of the areas studied include safety, asbestos, air quality, accessibility, technology, lighting, mechanical systems, roofing, extracurricular space and adequacy of classrooms.

After determining the needs, the school board and administration worked with consultants to determine preliminary budget estimates on the costs of three different approaches to these needs: (1) repairs, (2) remodeling and (3) construction. Regardless of the approach they choose, the cost will exceed the current budget for maintenance, and would require using operating dollars (our classroom dollars) to address the needs. The school board determined that the better strategy is to bond for the construction work, rather than use operating dollars.

After taking the time to review the information from the previous referendum, the School Board decided to take a new approach that utilized more community input before finalizing a new plan. Using listening sessions, community meetings and a 2015 survey, the School Board gathered information and ideas from residents to help create a plan. This information was shared with a task force that included a cross section of citizens, who determined that the most fiscally responsible solution was a new Grade 5-12 Middle/High School, while keeping and repairing Rippleside Elementary School.

What will this plan cost?

The school bond referendum asks voters to approve a \$68,500,000 plan, to be repaid over 20 years. There are a few important things to know about this plan:

- The size of the plan, and the 20-year repayment, are typical for school districts that are replacing one building while remodeling others.
- Once voters have approved a referendum, the size of the bonds cannot increase.
- This money cannot be used for any purpose that is not listed in the bond question, including staff salaries or other day-to-day operational costs.
- All residents, businesses, farmer and owners of recreational property pay for a share of these bonds.

Taxpayers can go to the District's website at www.isd1.org to calculate the tax impact on their parcel of property and to find further information about the plan.

How does this plan benefit our local taxpayers that don't have students in school?

Good schools are among the most important factors in determining the quality of our community. In addition, this school is being designed so all residents can use it as a community center.

What is a bond referendum?

In Minnesota, voters decide whether school districts can increase property taxes to pay for the bonds used renovating, constructing and equipping school buildings. Like a loan on a car or mortgage on a house, the bonds need to be repaid over time.

Why are we considering building now?

Interest rates continue to be at the lowest they have been in a generation. Construction costs are lower than before the recession, but are likely go up in the future. Finally, the immediate needs in the current high school require a solution sooner, rather than in several years.

Where, when and how can I vote?

The bond referendum vote will be on the ballot for the primary election on Tuesday, August 9, 2016. You may vote at your usual and normal polling location. You may also vote by absentee ballot any weekday between now and Election Day at the [Aitkin County Courthouse](#).

Where can I find more information?

Information is available on the school website at www.isd1.org. Click on the red box labeled "August 9th Referendum Information" to bring up the most recent referendum information. . This site has information about the previous referendum vote, district survey results, listening sessions and task force planning meetings and the recommendation made to the Board. Additional questions can be directed to Superintendent Bernie Novak at 218-927-7100.

What happens if the referendum fails?

If the referendum fails, ISD #1 will have to find different ways to address the facility issues. Both the citizen task force and the School Board have concluded that our needs are too great to ignore. For the next one or two years, we will continue to spend money out of our operating budget each year for repairs and maintenance. In the long term, any solution will have a tax impact, and a partial solution will require additional spending in the near future.

Why didn't the District maintain the buildings?

Our buildings have served us well and have been well maintained, given their age. The repairs and replacements needed for roofs, single pane windows and ventilation are necessary to meet modern standards of efficiency and safety. Eight additions have been made to the high school, addressing student and space needs. However, the oldest portion of the High School was built in 1936. The task-force recommended that in the long run, a new Grade 5-12 building would be the best solution and made this recommendation to the School Board.

Can we fix the schools rather than build new?

Yes. The question the school board asked is not whether or not it is possible to fix the current facilities, but instead "is it the best solution?" The citizen task force looked carefully at all options, and determined that voters should have the ability to decide whether they prefer a new building rather than investing in an aging and landlocked high school.

What will happen to the current property that will no longer be used for schools?

As space and new facilities are built and developed, current properties and buildings could be sold. Assistance may be available for any potential demolishing costs.

What will the remodeled and new schools look like?

Preliminary design options have been developed and will be available to review on the district's web site. Because complete architectural plans for such a large project are expensive, they are not finalized until a referendum amount is passed.

Why weren't bids used to estimate project costs?

Real bids (the kind that become binding through contracts) can only be made based off of formal specifications from a fully designed architectural plan. For now, the school district has decided to not invest the money needed for a fully designed plan. However, the current estimates are consistent with other recent facilities work in Central and Eastern Minnesota.

Why aren't we building one new preK-12 Building?

Moving all existing facilities to one campus would be unrealistic and cost prohibitive, based on the research conducted by the school district and the discussions of the citizens' task force.

Has the District calculated the annual operating savings by combining buildings?

There is not a final number yet. However, a more efficiently constructed building will reduce costs, as will other savings realized by bringing Grades 5 through 12 together.

Is the school buying property?

Yes. The School Board and Administration have identified the need for property as part of long-range planning, whether or not a new school is constructed. ISD #1 will be purchasing property as part of this planning.

What will happen to students during construction?

Students will continue to attend classes in the existing buildings until the new spaces open. A safe learning environment will be provided for our students during construction.

Is there a sample ballot?

Yes, the sample ballot can be reviewed on Aitkin County's website. A link is provided on the District's website.

Can I vote absentee?

Yes, absentee voting is permitted. You can vote at the [Aitkin County Courthouse](#).

Would construction be handled locally?

By law, any school project with a value greater than \$100,000 must be bid and must be awarded to the lowest bidder. While local preference is not permitted, local companies will be notified and able to bid on the project work or obtain subcontracts for work.

Will residents continue to have input on the school design?

Yes. Significant community input will be sought during the design process, if the referendum passes.

Why is only one option being presented to the community?

State law does not permit different facility options to be presented to voters at the same time.

Do we need to buy new desks, cabinets and other furniture under this plan?

Some new furniture would be included, but the plan budget is only for a minimal replacement. The District does intend to recycle and reuse most district inventory.

Was consolidation with another district considered?

Yes. Consolidation with another school district would not reduce the need for improved buildings, and would take potentially take away a valued asset in our community – a local high school.

Why are you having this election in August and not on the General Election in November?

The recommendation from the citizen task force was to offer the election as soon as possible to learn the community's opinion of a new school. The longer the community delays in investing in our schools, the higher the costs will be for each plan.

Does the state provide matching funds for debt payments for us?

No. Not for our school district. State equalization aid uses state money to reduce the tax burden on residents based on property valuations of school districts. But in the case of ISD 1, our tax base is too high to receive any state aid.

How will we evaluate protection of wetlands, traffic safety and other design issues?

All are elements that will be considered as part of the design process. The District will work with the other local government entities jointly on several of these. An Environmental Assessment Worksheet will likely be required, which will formally answer these important questions about a new school.

I heard a community center is part of this plan is this true?

Yes, the task force felt the new school needed to serve as a community center. Items such as a fitness center, community education space, gymnasiums, library/media center, and auditorium would all be spaces that would have shared use in partnership with the community.

Is "PreK" included in this plan?

Yes, Early Childhood learning space will be added at Rippleside.

Is an auditorium included in the project?

Yes, with 700+ seats based on the citizen task force recommendation.

Is there a pool? How about a fieldhouse?

These were not considered to be high priority items at this time. However, a pool or fieldhouse (or both) are options in the future – the plan is that the land acquired by the district for a new school will allow for future expansion if needed.

There is enough gym space for being able to bring tournaments to Aitkin, as was recommended by the task force.

What will you do with the existing schools? Are demolition/reclamation costs included in the price of the project? What about existing athletic sites?

The preferred option is to sell the buildings and land to an interested buyer. It is unlikely that the current high school building can be used as is, so the price may need to be discounted to reflect that. The District will take at least two years to try to sell the high school building and land. If that doesn't work, the high school will be demolished and just the land will be sold.

Will the interest rate greatly affect the cost of the plan?

Interest rates will be fixed for the duration of the bonds, although the District can refinance bonds if interest rates drop.

Does anyone know what the chances are that the August 9th referendum will pass?

The community will make that decision. The School District's role is to provide the best factual information so an individual choice can be made by each voter.

But wouldn't it be cheaper for taxpayers to just keep these three buildings operating, rather than build new?

The School Board looked at two factors in selecting the right plan for the August referendum:

1. Serving the needs of our students for the next 20-30 years

2. The total cost and value for taxpayers over 20-30 years, including ongoing maintenance and repair costs.
3. The input heard at community meetings, the results of the district wide survey, and the decisions of the citizens' task force.

While there are certainly plans that are “cheaper” today, it is the belief that the referendum proposal is best for students. However, it is up to the voters to make this decision.

How would the construction and remodeling project be managed?

The school district will retain Architect and Construction Manager Services to assist the District with this project.

How will this plan help our students perform better in the real world after graduation?

Healthier and safer schools that are designed for modern teaching and curriculum will help all students. Educational standards change over time, and we adapt our schools to meet those standards. In the case of Aitkin High School, the citizens' task force and the School Board agreed that residents should decide if a new school is the best plan for making these changes. If residents vote NO, we won't be able to make all of the changes, but some of them will need to be made – and there will be an impact on taxes.

How will this plan change our career and technical programs?

Educating students to be able to perform in the real world is an important role for our school district. Helping students prepare for jobs after high school is just as important as preparing our students for college. A new facility will give us the opportunity to replace our dated career and technical educational spaces with new spaces. New spaces could be set up with the newest innovations in technology so that our students can learn about fields such as agriculture, healthcare, construction, and manufacturing to name a few.

Why can't we continue using the spaces we have?

We can. But we will need to spend a significant amount of money to improve the health, safety and educational quality of the schools. If this bond referendum fails, an option to make these improvements will be brought forward.

How would we use the athletic facilities for educating our students?

Athletic facilities provide needed space during for our daily education programs. This is important to our students and is required to be included in our curriculum for each student. The need for athletic facilities focusses on educating our students but will also be utilized for school teams and community uses.

Why would we build new if our enrollment is declining?

A majority of Minnesota school districts are experiencing modest enrollment declines, in both Greater Minnesota and the metro area. The need for quality, safe and healthy schools does not change because our enrollment is slipping by 1-2% per year.

Won't our space needs decrease as our enrollment shrinks?

Small changes in enrollment do not change the space needs within a school. The high school is being designed for an average grade level of 90-105 students, although we will make sure there is capacity to handle more, if enrollment increases before the end of the next decade.

Won't the higher taxes hurt our local business owners?

Residents need to determine whether the benefits of this plan justify the costs – that's why we are holding a referendum. The citizen task force concluded that this plan has the highest value of the plans they reviewed. Other districts in this area with recent or current major building projects in recent years include Pequot Lakes Schools, Moose Lake Schools, and Northland Community Schools.

Can't we wait a few more years?

We can. But the plan will be more expensive, and we will continue to spend money each year on maintenance projects, using operating dollars that could be kept in classrooms.