

The Time is Now for a New West Elementary

By David Truitt, Superintendent

Back in February 2018, I wrote an article about the importance of our community rising up for our Prekindergarten through Grade 5 students and staff. I started the article with a quote I saw on a sign while driving in Waco. The sign read, "An Investment in our Schools is an Investment in our Community." I said then that never in the history of West had this statement meant more than it did at that point in time. At that moment, the District had just reopened the 1923 and 1957 buildings, and we were in year two of the new West Middle/High School. The building of the baseball and softball complex was done, and work was underway on the 1967 gymnasium and track and football complex. I declared West ISD an "Education Destination" and set out a plan to finish the District's recovery from the West Explosion and our master facility plan with a bond project for a new West Elementary School.

I shared that all but one facility was ready for the many future generations of Trojans and Lady Trojans. My hope was that West Elementary would not be forgotten, but treated with the same respect, care, and urgency as our other construction projects. I shared that West Elementary was the campus where our youngest and most-in-need learners attended school for seven years. It was the campus that we moved back grades 4 and 5 following the West Explosion, and how it was slowly filling up and getting overcrowded in key learning spaces. That spring, I asked that everyone try to keep that campus at the forefront of their minds as we moved through several bond awareness events and activities and eventually the election. It was the campus that needed the attention it deserved as we sought to redefine how we educated and ensured the safety of our hundreds of elementary students. This work was worth the investment in our schools and community, but most importantly our students.

Over the past month, I have shared several updates on the future of the West Elementary School campus and how a new bond project would be a priority topic in our work. Many staff and community discussion and planning sessions were held for the District to hear feedback in regards to the May 2018 bond results, staff and community survey data, and potential new bond timelines and tasks. I shared updates from three, different Special Called Board Meetings, and two Public Hearings were scheduled to hear public comment. During these meetings, I shared why I believed this decision was the best long-term solution for our last district construction project for decades to come. I shared how a bold response was needed to help relieve an overcrowded campus.

During the Special Called Meeting on Thursday, August 15, 2019, the West ISD Board of Trustees discussed and voted to adopt the order to call a bond for a new West Elementary School for the upcoming November Election. The bond figure was less than our new bond capacity, but at the same time, the Board reviewed the current construction costs and figures versus the 2018 estimates. The bond budget figure approved was \$21,485,000., and the district tax rate would be \$1.37 if the community approves the bond. For a district homeowner assuming a \$100,000. market value with exemption, the monthly tax impact would be \$11.42. In 2018, the District was looking at a maxed out tax rate of \$1.50 along with a maxed out bond capacity. Also, a district homeowner was looking at a monthly tax rate impact of \$19.16 on a home market value of \$100,000. for a bond amount of \$20,000,000.

If the bond is approved, the campus would be located on currently under negotiation District property off Cottonwood Road (2114), and it would accommodate 750 students in Prekindergarten through Grade 5. The campus would include thirty-five classrooms, core spaces, and student services areas,

including dyslexia, special education, and learning intervention rooms. During this Special Meeting, the Board also approved Claycomb Architects for this project.

Over the next few weeks, I will include in the paper more detailed information that will be shared and discussed at several upcoming Bond Town Hall Meetings. We have been working hard to acquire the needed acreage for the new campus site, complete a campus rendering and design plan for the new campus, and review ways to keep the construction costs down.

The needs I presented during the 2017-2018 school year are even greater in 2019-2020. I know our community cares greatly about the safety of our students and staff, continuing student growth, overcrowded shared spaces, and lack of available classroom space across the campus. As you can see, I am striving to improve the communication of our new bond plan and share the many ways we are working through the feedback shared following the May 2018 Bond. As always, I am available to discuss any aspect of this project. I hope you will consider attending one of the upcoming Town Halls. For additional information about the bond project, please visit westisd.net and click on the bond information link.