

West Elementary School Bond Project Planning Meeting Recap

By David Truitt, Superintendent

On Tuesday, July 16, 2019, over fifty staff members, parents, and community members met at the West ISD Administration Building to discuss a possible future plan for a new Bond Project for a new West Elementary School. The meeting was scheduled as a kick-off for a discussion with interested stakeholders to share updates from the May 2018 Bond Election and possible tasks and timelines for a new Bond Project. I led the meeting, and it was purposefully scheduled as a Special Called Meeting of the Board of Trustees.

The agenda included an update on “Good Things” happening across West ISD this summer, the introduction of the West Elementary School leadership team of Mrs. Carrie Kazda and Dr. Whitney Dudik, Reflections on the work of the West ISD Strategic Planning Team and the May 2018 Bond Planning Committee, a Review of the May 2018 Bond Election, Lessons Learned from the May 2018 Bond Election, Reflections of the Bond Political Action Committee, Potential new Bond Tasks and Timelines, and a Question and Answer time.

I began the meeting by reminding the group about our work since the West Fertilizer Plant Explosion and the reasons behind the decision to move all elementary grades (Prekindergarten through Grade 5) to the current West Elementary campus. The group reviewed the campus construction and repair needs assessment, and how this project could positively affect West in the present and future. The group completed an activity based on listing their Top 3 concerns with the current facility, and the most common responses centered on campus safety concerns, lack of classroom space, and the size of the cafeteria and kitchen space. I shared an update on the student enrollment figures for the past three years. For Prekindergarten through Grade 5, the campus has grown from 519 students in 2016-2017 to 564 in 2018-2019. This August 2019, West Elementary School is projected to open with 588 students. This is the largest student figure for our elementary grade levels since before the explosion, but during that time, West ISD had an elementary campus for Prekindergarten through Grade 3 and intermediate campus for Grades 4 and 5.

Next, I reminded the group of the work of the Strategic Planning Team, and the ninety-seven community leaders, parents, business owners, and staff members who met throughout the fall of 2017 to discuss ways to best move West ISD forward in the coming years and decades. From those meetings and discussions came thirty-five action statements, each under a District Improvement Goal header. To date, only five of those action statements have not been completed. The new West Elementary School is one of those action statements. I also shared the many options this team reviewed in regards to the West Elementary School Project. They discussed adding temporary buildings, renovating and adding on to the current campus, and new construction on the current and a new site. The Board of Trustees unanimously approved all thirty-five action statements on November 15, 2017, and, as you know, the Called Bond for May 2018 came from this work.

The group reviewed the Early Voting, Mailed-in Ballots, and Election Day totals from the May 2018 Election. As you know, the measure failed, 529-468. The group discussed the voting data from the county and the demographic breakdowns. We cannot receive the breakdown of how folks voted, but rather who came out to vote and when. We observed that 9% of the West Elementary School parents and 71% of the West ISD staff voted. We discussed the polling locations and voter registration strategies.

Next, we turned to the Bond Election feedback from the community and discussed a potential solution for each concern. Concerns included our election plan and strategy, the need to own the land for the new campus site, the completion of the new campus rendering and layout (including square footage and campus specifics about classroom, elective, and office space), the need to increase the West ISD staff compensation plan, the desire to improve the West Elementary School state accountability rating and letter grade, ways to reduce the West ISD tax rate, a plan to improve communication with the community about a new Bond Project before the Bond is called by the Board, and the need to call the new Bond for less than the May 2018 proposed amount of \$20 million. The group also discussed the community's desire to review ways to value engineer the campus and to review the May 2018 proposed square footage of the campus. The intermediate campus site and old Trojan Field land was also brought up. The group asked West ISD to clean-up the sites and put the land up for sale for possible new home lots.

Mrs. Holly Willis shared her reflections as the former chair of the Political Action Committee. She outlined new ideas for reaching all potential voters along with the best ways to share the bond information with the community of West. Less yard signs, social media, and flyers were mentioned in favor of more face-to-face discussions and tours of the campus. The recent West ISD and state tax relief was also discussed as a big discussion point to share with the community. This portion of the agenda morphed to a discussion about the timing of the next potential Bond Project, any feedback from the group for the Board and me, what points West ISD needed to address before calling another Bond, and ways to help ensure the next Bond passed.

The meeting ended with a call for West ISD to schedule several more listening/feedback sessions. The next time to come share your thoughts with me is Tuesday, July 30, 2019, at 6:30 PM in the library of West Elementary School. As I have shared in the past, please feel free to call at (254) 981-2000, stop by the office at 406 W. Shook Street, or email me at dtruit@westisd.net. My current work is to prepare answers and a response to each of the community concerns from the May 2018 Election. I will continue to share updates with the Board of Trustees and the community, consult with our architect and our financial planner, and prepare a final project recommendation for debate and consideration. It is an exciting time to be a part of the community of West. My hope is that I can provide answers to your questions and concerns, so that you can make an informed decision for you and your families as we plan for the future of our Prekindergarten through Grade 5 Trojans and Lady Trojans.