

Letter to the Editor

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Dear Editor:

Between now and March 14, voters of Oakes Public School District have the opportunity to decide whether our district should invest up to \$14.84 million to address key facility infrastructure needs. It has been 25 years since voters have been asked to vote on a bond referendum for facility improvements, and 43 years since one was approved. This is a generational decision.

All school districts and boards encounter challenges of various kinds. My dad was on the Oakes School Board from 1963 until 1976. Two notable developments during those years include the reorganization with the Guelph district and the construction of what was then the Southeast Multi-District Vocational Center. I remember hearing of the challenges and controversy of those efforts. I've heard from 1990s board members and administrators that there were times the district barely had enough money to cover paychecks. I've heard that area schools had withdrawn from the vocational center and the board considered shutting it down and turning it into a bus garage. There are always challenges.

In 2024, we are challenged with aging mechanical systems and kitchen facilities, parts of which are either non-functioning, non-repairable, inefficient, or far past their expected useful lives, in buildings that are 60 and 100 years old. The cost to build a new school far exceeds the district's statutory debt limit, never mind the comfort level of our local taxpayers. We have learned that even the cost to repair is extremely high.

I have been asked why this work wasn't done years ago. I can't speak for earlier school boards, but this is the first time in my twelve years on the board that we have conducted a comprehensive district-wide assessment of all our facilities. I believe that previous school boards made decisions based on information that was made available to them, the state of the local economy (particularly the agricultural economy), and what was believed to be most needed at the time.

In drafting and shaping 2024's proposed plan, this board invited input from all stakeholders to identify the district's needs. An initial \$16.8 million proposal was shared for consideration and discussion. The district welcomed additional feedback through meetings, surveys, and visits to the buildings. Stakeholders got first-hand information about the condition of the facilities and systems and asked hard, thoughtful questions. The board responded to this feedback by narrowing the scope of the proposed project to only the most critical needs of HVAC/indoor air quality, sewer pipe replacement, kitchen improvements, and the addition of accessible bathrooms, removing improvements to high school classroom spaces and cafeteria aesthetics. With these changes, the cost of the current proposal is \$14.84 million, a reduction of about 13%, but still an astounding dollar amount.

This is an important decision for our community. Affordable family housing and a thriving school system are likely among the top reasons people will decide to live and work in our community. Lack of either of

these will result in people choosing to live elsewhere.

I am proud of our district team for the process that has been followed to raise awareness of the issues and respectfully discuss possible solutions. I believe the board is presenting the best possible plan within the constraints of North Dakota's school financing environment. We have now placed the decision in the hands of the voters. I urge everyone to cast an informed vote by learning as much as possible about the plan and its impact on taxpayers. Comprehensive information is available at OurSchoolOurFuture.org. Contact me or any other school board member or Superintendent Anna Sell with additional questions or concerns. Absentee ballots are available now and may be requested from the school district office. The vote requires a 60% majority to pass.

We have challenges, just like past generations of school boards and administrators. I'm thankful for decisions made by school boards and voters 50-some years ago to come together with the Guelph district. I'm thankful that the district passed a bond referendum in 1981 to add the North Gym and other improvements to the elementary and high school buildings. I'm thankful that the district built the career tech center in the 1970s and that it didn't become a bus garage in the 1990s. Whatever the voters decide, I hope that we can look back in twenty-five or fifty years and say that we are thankful for the decision that was made.

kindest regards,
 Sonia Meehl