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(VIDEO) Rockaway Board of Education retunes referendum, sets forth new spending plan

By ANTHONY LUSARDI Contributing Writer May 13, 2019



Rockaway Board of Education member Jeffrey Tobias, left, and School Business Administrator William Stepka discuss a new school referendum with the mayor and Borough Council on Thursday, May 9.

Photo by Anthony Lusardi

ROCKAWAY – Officials in the grades K-8 school district are hoping the second time will be the charm when it come to passing a construction referendum to make repairs in both borough schools.

Members of the Board of Education and the school district's administration met with the Borough Council on Thursday, May 9, and the subject was a new school construction referendum.

The referendum project now amounts to \$12,500,000, with the state to provide up to 34 percent, or about \$4,200,000. The local share by the borough will be 66 percent, or \$8,300,000, and will cost the average assessed home value of \$300,900 approximately \$250 per year or \$21 per month for the next 20 years.

The date for voting on the new bond referendum will be Tuesday, Sept. 24, and will take place from 2 to 8 p.m. at the First Assembly of God Church, located on 113 East Main Street.

The presentation was given by Superintendent Phyllis Alpaugh, Business Administrator William Stepka and Board Member Jeffrey Tobias.

Last October, borough residents voted down the initial referendum due to the high price tag.

The first referendum consisted of three projects, including various infrastructure improvements for both Lincoln Elementary and Thomas Jefferson Middle School. The defeated referendum included Lincoln School receiving new classrooms for its preschool and kindergarten classes, along with a new main office, while Thomas Jefferson would receive a new gymnasium, which would have been attached to its fourth grade wing.

The infrastructures improvements to both schools had amounted to \$13,790,700. State aid would have paid 40 percent to the costs, amounting to \$5,510,763. Had these improvements been approved, borough residents with homes assessed at \$300,900 would have paid \$293.67 per year. The new Lincoln classroom and main office amounted to \$2,394,400, while state aid would have been six percent, amounting to \$137,199. Had this been approved, borough residents with houses assessed at \$300,900 would have paid \$73.73 per year. The fourth grade wing gymnasium at Thomas Jefferson amounted to \$3,739,000. There was no state aid for this project, and had it approved, borough residents with houses assessed at \$300,900 would have paid \$121.24 per year.

The total cost of all three projects would have been \$488.64 per year for the average homeowner for the next 20 years, had the proposal passed.

Since then, the Board of Education has searched for ways to address and approve some referendum projects.

"We have scaled back the infrastructure to safety and efficiency items only, including the boiler, unit ventilator and related HVAC items, and we have folded in the Lincoln School addition which will provide three new classrooms and a new main office, with security vestibule," said Stepka.

This new referendum consists of various infrastructure improvements for Lincoln, including replacement of boilers, pipes, and unit ventilator, classroom ceiling repair and abatement, electrical panel upgrades, gym roof top air conditioning unit and ceiling replacement, restroom upgrades, relocation of the IT closet, asbestos replacement in the cafeteria, LED interior lighting and plaster repair. Lincoln will also receive a new wing of three new classrooms for its kindergarten classes, which will replace the existing trailers, and the main office will be relocated to the front of the building.

The new referendum also allows infrastructure improvements for Thomas Jefferson, including replacement of boilers, pumps, hot water heaters, unit ventilator, copper piping and roof, along with electric service upgrades, gym roof top unit, student and faculty restrooms upgrades and renovations, a security vestibule, and asbestos tile removal.

"We've really focused on infrastructure needs, which are in desperate need of repair," said Tobias.

"I don't think anybody is arguing that our boilers are in failure state. Infrastructure, safety, and security. Those three things are really the priorities. The bottom line is we've looked at the outcome of what the taxpayer impact would be. And at this point, the proposed taxpayer impact of this referendum would be \$250 per year based on the towns average household assessed value of \$300,900 for 20 years," he said.

"It's long overdue. We really listened to residents and we think we got a lot of favorable feedback about the new proposed referendum. I've had personal conversations with several council members. I've talked to some people within the town. And we're going to put a very large public relations campaign to get the word out."

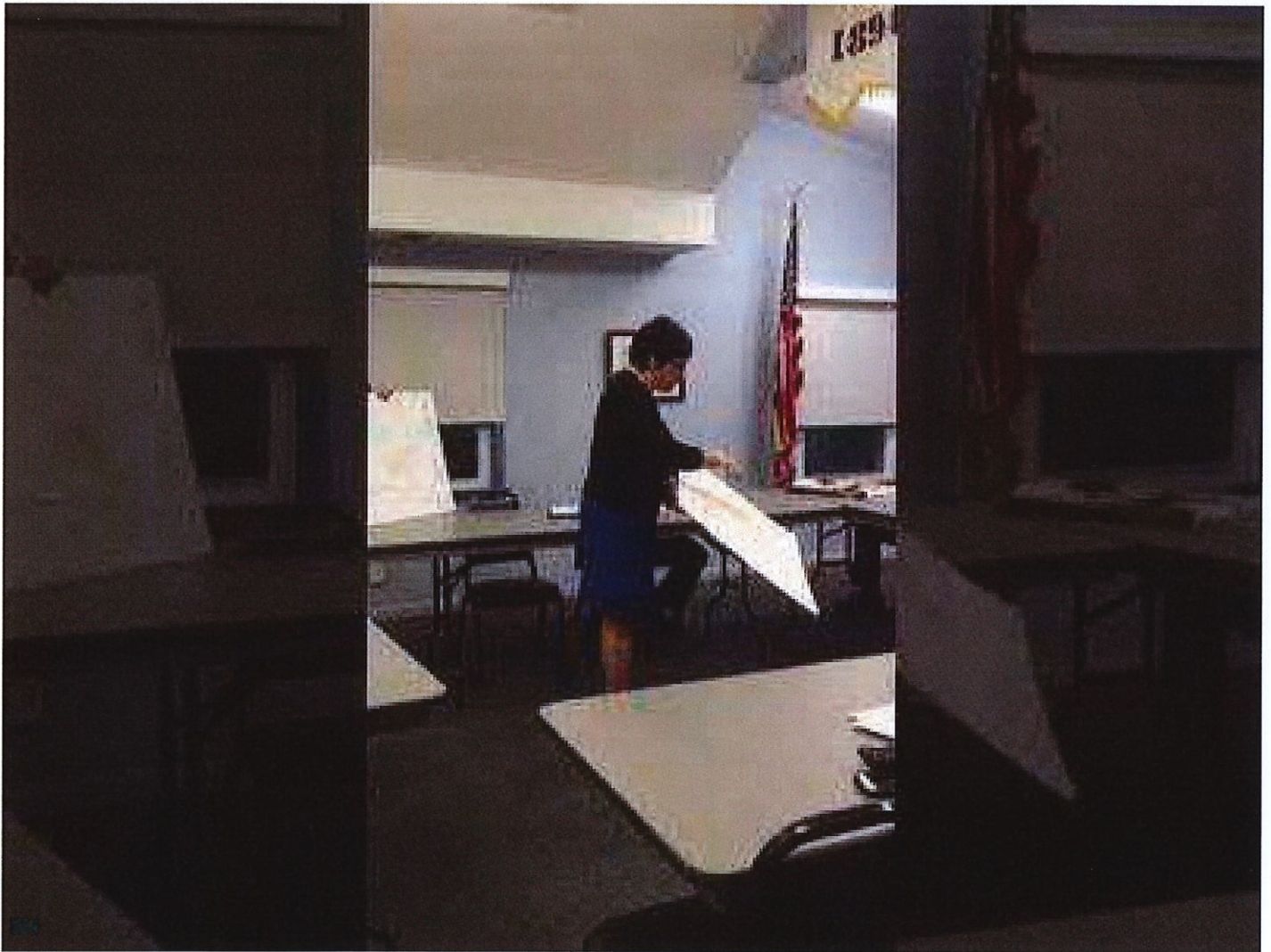
Superintendent Alpaugh said the first referendum was voted down because borough residents were not given the right details of the projects.

"I think of the one biggest things we learned was everyone needs to have the right information and then they can make their decisions," she said.

"I think last time there was a lot of miscommunication."

School officials said there is a referendum advisory committee headed by Tobias and meetings are open to the public, and for every regular Board of Education meeting, there will be an update on the referendum.

In other news, the council read a proclamation, declaring that the police department will take part in the PAARI Initiative, which aids those who are actively seeking police assistance when struggling with opiate or other substance abuse disorders to obtain resources and access to treatment.



Rockaway Borough school officials detail plans for a new school construction referendum this fall
May 13, 2019

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