

More students arriving in schools make fixes challenging

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A possibility to solve the space constraints within the Austin School District if the bond issue vote failed would be to lease space in empty buildings in town. But moving into a building and calling it a school is easier said than done.

A lot of considerations would go into this option, including state requirements having to do with the number of restrooms, the need to provide food service and gymnasium space is also important, said Mark Stotts, district's director of finance and operations. There are also possible remodeling costs to take into consideration because most buildings aren't designed with classroom spaces in mind.

This process, called levy for lease, can be done with school board approval. The district has a \$150 per pupil unit limit on how much it can levy, which comes to a maximum \$752,000 limit per year that can be used to lease space for educational purposes without having to go to the voters.

The district has \$319,000 worth of current leases. These include spaces at Riverland Community College (for special education programs), the ice arena for hockey, gymnasium space at the YMCA and Queen of Angels church where the Community Learning Center is located.

That leaves roughly \$433,000 for the district to add in leases in the future.

Other possibilities

"I can almost for certain say that class sizes are going to have to go up," Stotts said. "What do you do?"

With operating money, Austin could hire more teachers for the growing number of students, "but where do you put them?" A lot of spaces that used to be classrooms now need to be spaces for other uses, like for special education programs and to accommodate technology.

Computer labs are also becoming more and more necessary. One example is for requirements with state testing and some of it being conducted online. Labs are needed to test students in a timely manner to meet these deadlines.

Another option might be breaking apart grade levels. For example, it could mean taking a grade of students from one of the elementary schools or Ellis Middle School and moving them into a leased space, Stotts said. But this "isn't really conducive to education because they're not going to have the same opportunities that the kids being housed in a regular school building are going to have," he said.

A solution that wouldn't be ideal, Stotts said, may be bringing in portables or mobile classrooms.

"But again, they all come with a cost," Stotts said. Whether that comes from property taxes or finding room in the budget, is something else that will need to be decided later.

With all of these options, nothing is set in stone, especially until after the election.

"I'm not saying any of this is going to happen, but those are the types of things we're going to have to explore," Stotts said.

Enrollment projections 'amazingly solid'

One of the concerns Stotts said he hears a lot from the community is whether enough students will be in the district in the coming years. According to a demography study done for grades K-12 in the district in 2009, the kids are here and they will continue to be here.

The study had four ranges of projections from a low to high end of the number of students that will be in the district. So far, those "numbers are amazingly solid," Stotts said. Enrollment figures are coming in near the high end of the projections.

For the 2010-11 school year, the high-end projection was 4,399 students in the district and 4,360 was the total actual enrollment. That was 39 under the high projection but still 20 more than the middle-range projection.

The projected high-end enrollment for this year is 4,479 and as of last week, 4,463 students were enrolled, Stotts said.

Austin Public Schools is expected to see enrollment rise by 400-500 students in the next four to five years, based on birth rates in the district. It has already gained 200 students over the past four years.

As long as there is a stable employment base in Austin, with the potential to grow, the same number of kids will be here, Stotts said. Because typically in Austin, younger people with families are the ones who will be filling jobs, he said.