

School officials work to get voters out to polls

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Austin Public Schools Superintendent David Krenz and Director of Finance and Operations Mark Stotts have been out and about in town this fall, talking to citizens about the \$28.9 million bond referendum on the Nov. 8 ballot.

It calls for a new school for fifth- and sixth-graders and modifications at Woodson Kindergarten Center.

Enrollments for schools are only projected to grow in the coming years. Take Ellis Middle School: It had an enrollment of 943 students for 2010-11, is just shy of 1,000 this school year and could see as many as 1,321 students if projections hold true.

That's for an enrollment capacity of 975 at Ellis, meaning it would have 346 more than it's supposed to hold.

"We have a lot of them," said Katie Berglund, principal at Ellis.

Ellis has a middle-school model of teachers on teams, with 150-170 kids on a team. That model won't be sustainable in the current space environment, Berglund said.

"We're in kind of a pickle at the middle school right now," Berglund said.

It isn't as though the district has been building schools recently. It's been more than 50 years. Ellis and Southgate Elementary School were built in 1958. Banfield Elementary School, Woodson and Neveln Elementary School were built about 10 years before that, Austin High School in 1921. Sumner Elementary School has been around since the 1800s.

Austin High isn't a viable option to relieve space issues. The third floor of the school is full of state-of-the-art science labs and the Area Learning Center, and the district's administrative offices are in the school as well.

"All the space in the high school is being used," Krenz said.

What if the referendum fails?

No specific plans are in place if the referendum fails to pass, but there are possibilities that will need to be explored should that happen.

The district might look into levy for lease, finding empty buildings in town to lease space to house students. This is an option that the school board can act on without voter approval, at up to \$752,000 in cost, Stotts said.

With leased space, the district might have to break apart grade levels by taking a grade of students from a school and moving them into the leased space. Class sizes increasing is something Stotts "can almost for certain say" will happen with a failed levy. A less-than-ideal option, Stotts said, would be bringing in portables or mobile classrooms to help with the space crunch.

"We've looked at everything, and we're using everything," Krenz said. "We're trying to be as fiscally responsible as possible."

Nothing, whether it's building a school and modifying Woodson or looking at alternatives, will be certain until after Nov. 8, when voters make their opinions known.