

Chamber panel backs EPISD bond

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The education committee of the Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce voted on Tuesday to support the El Paso Independent School District as it moves ahead with plans to ask voters for \$230 million in bonds to build new campuses and make additions to existing ones.

The committee next week will ask the full chamber to back the program, which will go to the voters in a referendum May 12.

“There’s really no option,” said Richard Dayoub, the chamber president. “I, myself, have two kids in the school system and I want them to have access to facilities that will make them thrive and succeed.”

If voters approve issuing the bonds, the district would build five new schools, rebuild Alamo Elementary and create a new West Side middle school and a new Northeast high school.

The bond money would also build classroom additions, update technology at several campuses and replace the roofs at some schools.

More than half of all the new construction would help the district deal with more than 10,000 new students it expects to gain through 2011 because of the growth at Fort Bliss.

The education committee’s vote is the first step toward securing the important backing of the business committee and EPISD Superintendent Lorenzo Garcia said he was confident chamber leaders would agree that securing proper instructional space for children in El Paso is important.

“Our business and their business go hand in hand. We have a great relationship,” Garcia, who met Tuesday with Chamber officials to talk about the proposed bond. “Their support comes with certain conditions, and I don’t have a problem with that,” Garcia said. The education committee was presented with four conditions to present to EPISD in exchange for the committee’s support, but members did vote on these during their Tuesday meeting:

- The creation of an accountability mechanism to oversee bond projects
- The presentation of a plan to handle other non-bond campus maintenance
- The implementation of policies and goals to increase student performance as a type of “return on investment” on behalf of the taxpayers.
- The presentation of a plan to create career pathways for all students in the district

District officials said the school board administration have established practices relating to most, if not all, of these topics.

“I appreciate the progressive attitude of this current board and administration,” said Michael Guerra, the chamber’s vice president for governmental relations. “I want to make sure that policies and procedure are in place that would prevent the district from getting to the position where it once was.”

EPISD board President Lisa Colquitt-Munoz said she appreciated the chamber’s concerns, and thanked the committee for its support.

“This one of the committees we were really focused on,” she said about the district’s meeting with business leaders.