

EPISD 2003 Bond Issue Projects Progressing Construction could be done next summer

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All major construction from the 2003 El Paso Independent School District bond program should be near completion by the time voters decide whether to give the district another \$230 million for more new schools and additions.

EPISD documents indicate all of the \$122 million in new construction under 2003 bond program has either been spent or allocated, and that those projects are on budget and will be done by the end of the summer.

“All the money is out there,” said Hector Martinez, EPISD associate superintendent of operations. “We are just waiting for the work to get done.”

In October 2003, voters approved a bond issue worth \$207 million. The bond included the refinancing of outstanding debt as well as millions of dollars to fix and update aging schools throughout the district.

The district has already opened schools such as Aoy, Moye and Western Hills elementary schools, as well as classroom additions and other construction at a dozen other campuses.

Still to be done are the reconstruction of Mesita Elementary School, construction of the new Harry “Hut” Brown middle school, and four elementary multipurpose classrooms and major additions at Coronado and Bowie high schools.

EPISD officials said they are happy with the way construction has been carried out. “The 2003 bond was definitely a test for the district,” said Trustee Lorraine O’Donnell. “It was a test of our transparency and responsibility to the taxpayers. I think we have passed.”

O’Donnell pointed to the bond oversight committee that has worked with the administration. The committee was charged with making sure projects were built on budget and that any change orders were credible and valid.

In 2003, voters thought the EPISD would build a modular sixth-grade center to relieve over-crowding at Morehead Middle School. That project is now a classroom wing addition and other improvements at Morehead.

“The plans were based on a public housing community being built in that area, and those plans never came through,” said Al Anderson, EPISD director of planning and

construction. “ With the help of the committee, the board was able to change the project to better accommodate the needs in the area.”

Although the new construction side of the bond is on budget and on time, another aspect of the 2003 project may not be.

As EPISD heads into the bulk of the refurbishment and upgrade phase of the construction program, officials believe inflation and cost increases may force the district to go over budget on these projects.

Voters in 2003 approved \$27 million on school repairs like heating and cooling replacements and new roofs, \$3 million in technology and security upgrades. “We are probably going to be a little shy of that,” Martinez said.

The administrators said it is still not known how much over budget those projects will be, but EPISD Chief Financial Officer Ken Parker said he’s already looking for external funding that will not bring additional cost to taxpayers.

He said the balance of the project could even be paid from the interest-drawing accounts and that could be enough to cover all projects,” Parker said. “If that doesn’t cover it, we’ll look for other sources.”

Taxpayers this year and for the next six years should expect to see an additional 14 or 15 cents tacked onto their tax rate to pay for the 2003 bond. The figure will gradually reduce to just one cent in 2031.

EPISD officials had told voters in 2003 to prepare for a 27-cent tax increase, but state matching funds, favorable interest rates and an increased tax base softened the tax blow to a maximum increase of 17 cents.

“I guess that’s the one bit of good news in the middle of a bunch of bad news about our taxes,” Northeast resident James Lopez said. “It’s hard to support school bonds when my taxes for everything else keep going up.”

The district hopes the successful completion and oversight of the 2003 bond will translate to “yes” votes for what is expected to be a \$230 million bond package up for approval next year.

The board has all but called for an election, and although there have been no formal vote, trustees have agreed on a project list that mostly deals with Fort Bliss-related growth.

“In 2003 the voters took a leap of faith on the district and we have shown to be prudent with their money,” board president Lisa Colquitt-Munoz said. “As we head into this next phase for a new bond, the district is in a position where it can use the mechanisms already in place and that are working to give tax payers a sense of transparency and trust.”

The 2007 election is expected to be on May 12, and although officials can't yet say what the tax impact would be if it is approved, they do believe state aid will make a big difference.

Hector Zavaleta said his numbers don't take into consideration the strong potential for state-matching funds, such as Existing Debt Allotment or Instructional Facilities Allotment, which can pay for about half of the districts new construction.

Superintendent Lorenzo Garcia said EPISD is in good shape to take on the bond, and that the needs in the district support the referendum.

"The 2003 bond program has been an overwhelming success," he said. "We have carried with the utmost of care the trust the public has placed in us."

Unfinished Projects

Several major construction projects remain unfinished from the \$207 million EPISD bond program of 2003. All are scheduled to be completed between the end of this month and the summer of 2007.

- Harry "Hut" Brown Middle, new school in the far west side.
- Mesita Elementary, reconstruction of campus
- Bowie High, new fine arts wing
- Coronado High, new fine arts wing and classroom wing
- Lee Elementary, new multipurpose room
- Moreno Elementary, new multipurpose room
- Nixon Elementary, new multipurpose room
- Newman Elementary, new multipurpose room