

EPISD sets bond vote for May 12

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By Gustavo Reveles Acosta

After months of planning – and some disagreements about how to present the projects to voters – the El Paso Independent School District Board of Trustees on Tuesday officially called for the \$230 million bond election on May 12.

The board had all but made the election official, having already agreed upon a project list that includes the building of a new Northeast high school and dozens of other construction plans aimed mostly at dealing with the surge in military students that will come as part of the Base Realignment and Closure process, or BRAC.

“We have been prudent with the (bond) money entrusted to us in 2003 and we are doing quality work with it,” board President Lisa Colquitt-Muñoz.

“Yes, there’s a lot being asked of the taxpayers, but we are investing in our children and the economic future of El Paso.”

If approved, the bond would add 7.5 cents to the tax rate and add \$75 to the annual school-tax bill of a \$100,000 home.

Administrators said the district is poised to receive millions in state matching funds for construction – known as the Existing Debt Allotment – that would ease the tax burden on homeowners.

“I understand that El Paso has the responsibility of educating the children of the military, so that’s why I am probably going to vote for the bond,” said Lori Escobar, who lives in East-Central El Paso. “But I also know that there are a lot of people who think they are paying too much in taxes and don’t want their bill to go up even more.”

Bob Cook, president of the El Paso Regional Economic Development Corp., told the board Tuesday that getting the bond passed was critical in meeting promises El Paso made to the U.S. Department of Defense when it decided to add about 20,000 troops to Fort Bliss by 2011.

“The Department of Defense asked if we were willing to invest in education, and we said absolutely yes,” he said. “So this bond is very important.”

The board voted 6-0 in favor of calling for the bond election. Trustee David Dodge did not attend the meeting because of a previous work commitment, district officials said.

But despite the united front, there was some disagreement on how to present the bond projects to voters.

Trustee Charles Roark said he wanted the board to meet and study the idea of breaking the bond into two separate issues: one that would ask voters to approve all new construction, and the other one for technology and maintenance.

“We have not sat down to talk about the wording that will be in the ballot,” Roark said. “This is the most challenging bond we will face, and we need to discuss this issue.”

Most other board members disagree with Roark, and said that there had been discussions on on how best to present the bond to the voters. “We need the whole enchilada, not just part of it,” Trustee Carlos Cordova said.

Trustee Lorraine O’Donnel said.: “I don’t know where you’ve been, but we have talked about this as a board. You’re bringing this up at the 11th hour.”

In other action, Superintendent Lorenzo Garcia announced the creation of a committee that will look into the athletic facility needs of athletes and extracurricular activities.

The creation came about after some parents argued that the bond should include the construction of stadiums at some high schools.

District officials said the committee will make their recommendations to the board and the administration later in the year, but that their findings would not be included in this bond election.”