

Saturday, September 1, 2012

Sunday, September 2, 2012

Monday, September 3, 2012

Tuesday, September 4, 2012

SENT ON BEHALF OF JOHN SCHUSTER, CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER,
OFFICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

THE MIAMI HERALD | EDITORIAL

A snapshot of the need

OUR OPINION: Miami-Dade schools merit \$1.2 billion for upgrades

Miami-Dade voters, now being asked to tax themselves to renovate crumbling schools, might not understand the extent of the need. A visit to most any public school illustrates the neglect. An upcoming series of “photo editorials” on the Opinion page will make the case.

Voters in November will be asked to extend soon-to-expire construction bonds for another 30 years. The money raised will be used to make desperately need upgrades in schools, a third of which were built before the Beatles sang I Want to Hold Your Hand on The Ed Sullivan Show. Half of the schools in Miami-Dade County are more than 40 years old, and a third are older than 50. Too many classrooms need technological enhancements — imagine, schools with no computers or Wi-Fi. Then there are the deteriorating buildings with leaky roofs, moldy air-conditioning and exposed bathroom pipes that smell just awful.

These improvements are crucial to this community’s future well-being. Just ask the Beacon Council, the county’s economic-development agency. The Council this year released its One Community, One Goal Target Industry Strategic Plan, which stressed the need for a world-class education system to nurture high-quality workers of the future.

But students learning under mid-20th-century conditions well into the 21st century will start their professional lives at a disadvantage. Leaks and mold are health hazards to which no student should be exposed. Illness impedes learning, too.

The \$1.2 billion plan would extend the tax that property owners already are paying under a 1988 construction bond issue. It’s due to expire in 2017. The cost? About \$10 more a year on the average, homesteaded \$158,000 house. No doubt, many residents are wary. They remember the promises made to get them to support the 1988 bond issue. Many of those promises went unfulfilled.

Schools chief Alberto Carvalho has included checks and balances in the process to ensure the construction is done equitably and cost-efficiently.

Our future depends on what we do today. Get the picture?



CHUCK FADELY/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

A West Dade middle school plagued with leaks and construction faults.

Blitz for bonds to redo schools begins

· Despite lingering economic woes, one pollster believes that voters will say yes to borrowing \$1.2 billion to upgrade schools.

BY LAURA ISENSEE lisensee@MiamiHerald.com

On Friday night, Miami Senior High alumni were invited back to their alma mater for fun and networking in Little Havana — plus a tour of renovations at the historic school.

The get-together is just one way the Miami-Dade school district is working to tell voters about its proposed \$1.2 billion bond referendum. The question will be on the Nov. 6 ballot: Do county voters want to borrow money to upgrade school buildings and technology?

Expect information at school open houses, business groups, home associations, a dedicated website and on social media. Even a smartphone app is in the works to offer continuous updates on the neighborhood-by-neighborhood impacts. “This is not about convincing,” Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said of the educational campaign. “This is an honest story of where we were, where we are and the possibilities for the future.”

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The bond referendum aims to provide needed renovations at nearly 300 schools and close the digital learning divide among students. Nearly half of the Dade schools are over 40 years old and technology can vary widely. The bond seeks to modernize classroom technology across the district.

Carvalho said the district will follow a grass-roots approach, starting with information at open houses and a detailed website. Launched this week, the site lets people see the work planned at their home schools.

Separately, a political action committee called Building for Tomorrow formed this week to drum up political support for the construction bonds. It is chaired by Antonio Argiz, chairman and CEO of the Morrison, Brown, Argiz & Farra accounting firm who was honored last fall for his philanthropy.

“We are striving obviously to maintain a clear firewall between administration, management, the school system and the marketing functions that rightly fall under the committee,” Carvalho said.

The bond issue has a good chance of passing, despite lingering economic woes, said Dario Moreno, a political science professor at Florida International University and pollster.

Why? The presidential election will draw a lot of Democrats. Carvalho, known for his political savvy, has laid the groundwork with business groups and board members. He also has burnished his reputation, improving the district’s relationship with the Legislature and balancing budgets in tough times.

Moreno said tax-wary voters have some appetite to help kids, just as they did in 2008 with the hearty renewal of The Children’s Trust.

“So far, I don’t see any organized opposition emerging. If it doesn’t, then I think it will probably pass,” Moreno said.

Voters will get the final say, he said.

“However, I do still think there could be a political backlash against the School Board members who voted to put this on the ballot. They will face a very different electorate in their reelection in August 2014 than in a November election.”

School Board Member Raquel Regalado understands that the bond issue, or anything resembling a tax, is a big concern to voters. “That is why we are placing it on the ballot and demanding transparency,” she said. “Unlike recent unpopular taxes or bond issuances, this is not money to the general fund, or for employee raises. This is self-help strictly for facilities and technology.”

Carvalho has pledged to create safeguards to make sure the program delivers fairly and on time, including new ethics rules and procurement procedures for minority businesses.

A MATTER OF ‘DETAIL’

The new bond program is, in essence, a continuation of the old program of 1988 — which ends in five years. And the new bond will be repaid through property tax revenues over 30 years. According to an analysis by Public Financial Management: For the first year, 2013, a homeowner would pay \$5 per \$100,000 of assessed value for the new program in addition to the \$23 for every \$100,000 of assessed value for the existing bond program, which ends in 2017.

For the full term of the new program, a homeowner would pay an average of \$27 for every \$100,000 of assessed value, up to the maximum of \$35 for every \$100,000 of assessed value by 2021.

The information campaign started with back-to-school. That week, Carvalho visited Notre Dame d’Haiti Catholic Church, a touchstone for many Haitian families in Miami, and talked about the bonds at the Latin Builders Association.

On the first day of class, Carvalho highlighted improvements at North Dade Middle School, which got a new campus after a threat of collapse two years ago, and Miami Senior High, the historic campus in Little Havana that has been expanded and is getting a facelift. At Miami Senior, Carvalho touted that the final cost of the project will come in at about \$50 million — about half of what was expected.

During a press conference about Tropical Storm Isaac, Carvalho and his chief facilities officer, Jaime Torrens, reminded residents about general capital needs, beyond any storm damage.

“We definitely are vulnerable to tropical storms and hurricanes because of the age of a lot of our buildings. Many of our air-conditioning systems in particular and our roofs are nearing the end of their service life,” Torrens said. “This remains a concern to us, and we look to a permanent solution.”

Other events on Carvalho’s calendar, where the bond issue will likely surface: at the Beacon Council; a town hall at Palmetto Senior High School; and the Kendall Federation of Homeowners Associations.

School Board Member Martin Karp said that detail is key. “If you don’t have the information, you’re going to be skeptical and say we’d love to support education, but this is a lot of money. With a level of detail, I have no problem getting behind this.”