
Saturday, Nov. 3, 2012

SCHOOL BONDS

A great investment for our children

BY ALAN FEIN afein@stearnsweaver.com

On Nov. 6, we will have an opportunity, together, to make an investment in our kids that will pay dividends for generations. We need to vote YES by punching 222 on our ballots and approve the School Board's proposed \$1.2 billion General Obligation Bond issue.

There are lots of obvious reasons to vote yes. First, the need is acute. Many schools in our county have not been renovated in nearly a half-century, and students in these older buildings can't take advantage of today's technology and digital learning environments.

Second, the timing is perfect. Interest rates are at historic lows and construction costs are down. Third, the cost to each of us is relatively minuscule, as the bond will replace a retired bond issue. Fourth, this project is a true private sector job creator, employing thousands of workers building lasting assets.

Looking beyond these reasons to vote YES for school bonds, our recent experience regarding school funding on Key Biscayne underscores why this investment makes so much sense for the rest of us.

Key Biscayne had been severely underserved by the school system for generations. There is but one public school on the Key, a K-8, which is overcrowded and in dire need of repair: an outdated and noisy air conditioning system and roof leaks lead to mold problems; antiquated plumbing subjects our kids and teachers to more health risks; and, like so many schools, the buildings aren't wired to take advantage of 21st Century technology.

Our high school problem was even worse: We had no high school! Our assigned high school was nearly 15 miles away, by far the longest commute in the county.

Then, in the spring of this year, our 50 year-old problem was solved. Key Biscayne's visionary mayor, Frank Caplan, met the School Board's visionary superintendent, Alberto Carvalho, and came up with a plan:

The Village of Key Biscayne would issue a \$20 million bond. The funds will bring the K-8 up to 21st Century standards, expand the Virginia Key campus where MAST Academy is located to include new magnet academies for Key Biscayne kids, and create joint-use playing fields. The Board undertook to recompense the Village half of the cost of construction.

Why is the Key Biscayne win/win experience relevant to the school bond vote?

First, it showed that school bonds have broad, bipartisan support. Even on relatively conservative Key Biscayne, citizens were overwhelmingly in favor of taxing themselves a little more to provide for a better education for their kids. The Key Biscayne Village Council unanimously approved the bond issue.

Second, and importantly, Key Biscayners learned through this process that our investment would be in good hands. We were uniformly impressed with the superintendent's vision and force of will. He convinced us that he will put his reputation on the line to ensure the money is wisely spent.

The superintendent's nimble and engaged senior staff also surprised us. We've all been conditioned to think that the School Board's offices are populated with clock-punching bureaucrats. Our experience revealed the opposite. Although our interlocal agreement was not finally approved until about six weeks before the school year, an energized staff made sure the new MAST campus was ready to accept 130 new Key Biscayne students on Aug. 20.

Now, the staff is working hard, planning timely construction to accommodate three new high-performing academies and to create challenging curricula.

Finally, we learned on Key Biscayne that investment in our schools can create dividends right away, in immediately rising home sales and prices. The simple fact is that people want to live in places with great public infrastructure and quality public education.

The Key Biscayne experience tells us what to expect when the bond is implemented. The money will be put to good use, directed by talented people who very much care about getting it right.

We will all win, right away.

Alan Fein is the chair-elect of the Performing Arts Center Trust and a former member of the Key Biscayne Village Council.
