

Miami-Dade School Board OK's ballot question for \$1.2 billion bond

By Laura Isensee

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Business leaders, teachers, parents, students and residents strongly endorsed a \$1.2 billion school bond referendum at the Miami-Dade School Board's meeting Wednesday.

How the issue will fare with voters will be decided at the polls Nov. 6. Approval would mean a slightly higher property tax bill for homeowners -- initially about a \$10 increase on average -- in order to upgrade schools and technology. It would effectively continue the tax from a construction bond issue that is set to expire in 2017.

The Miami-Dade School Board approved the ballot question after hearing two hours of comments overwhelmingly in support of the measure. Speakers shared stories of crumbling buildings, broken air-conditioning units, leaky windows, termites, crash-prone computers, and the need to catch up on increasingly important technological tools. Business leaders pushed for the economic boost -- both immediate and long-term.

"Not only do we endorse it, I want to be on the speakers bureau," said T. Willard Fair, president of the Urban League of Greater Miami. "If there is anybody who does not want to support this, send them to me. I will not stand idly by."

Board members and the schools chief started outlining their public information campaign, including a website.

"The real hard work begins now," Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said.

School Board member Martin Karp said they need to explain to voters why buildings are in disrepair and where the money will go: "We're going to have to have a open conversation."

Board member Renier Diaz de la Portilla, who voted against the bond issue earlier this month, was absent Wednesday. Board member Carlos Curbelo, who previously voted against seeking the bond referendum, voted in support of the ballot question. "I haven't decided on how I will vote as a resident ... But I will always support having voters express their will," he said.

Board member Marta Pérez cast the sole no vote. She said she was concerned the ballot question was not explicit enough about taxing residents. "I think that should be part of what we're telling the people. This is a sacrifice."

Carvalho and the board's attorney, Walter Harvey, said the language was clear and met legal requirements.

The vote followed another key step in the process. The state's Department of Education OK'd the district's project list and the financing plan. Now the ballot language goes to the Miami-Dade elections department for approval.

Carvalho said the district's finance and budget team were able to restructure the plan so that the burden on the average taxpayer would be less than first expected: an extra \$10 dollars to the tax bill of the average property owner instead of \$19. Carvalho also highlighted a new economic study by the Washington Economic Group, which estimates the \$1.2 billion bond would generate about 18,400 direct and indirect jobs and as much as \$2.3 billion in economic output.

Skepticism remained from some members of the black community, who said there needs to be more fairness, including economic benefit to black businesses.

William "D.C." Clark, president of the Miami Central Senior High alumni group, said the black community has supported previous bond measures, but then money gets diverted into a "shell game." "Bond issues and the black community haven't always gone hand in hand," he said.