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Voter-financed projects begin in Lake County school districts



Diamond Lake School Principal Kurt Preble discusses the work being done at West Oak Middle School in Mundelein, including the replacing of the tile flooring in the fifth grade.

Paul Valade | Staff Photographer



Mick Zawislak

Successful Election Day pitches that had voters investing tax dollars in elementary school districts on opposite ends of Lake County are bearing fruit, as building projects proceed this summer in Mundelein-based Diamond Lake District 76 and Antioch District 34.

Faced with deteriorating facilities and other problems, borrowing requests on the ballot April 4 were approved by nearly two-thirds of voters in each district.

Both were retiring outstanding debt, meaning instead of a tax hike, voters decided whether to keep property tax bills roughly the same rather than see a decrease. That was key in making the choice palatable for voters, who approved

measures to raise \$18.8 million in District 34 and \$11.4 million in District 76.

The approvals changed the outlook in both systems from struggling to make do to excitement about solutions that are to come.

"It's a relief," said Lisa Yaffe, District 76 board president.

Yaffe and MaryBeth Hulting, her counterpart in District 34, praised the community support that will result in needed school updates and improvements.

While some referendum-related work is underway in both districts, activity is focused on myriad details to get cash in hand and prepare for the big stuff, like building additions in Antioch 34.

"Until you pass a referendum, you don't invest in all the schematic designs you need to go out for bid," said Superintendent Jay Marino. "In the meantime, our architects are going 1,000 miles per hour to get the schematics done."

The plan is to finish those by mid-December, advertise for bids in early January and break ground in March for additions at Oakland and W.C. Petty elementary schools.

In the interim, portable classrooms long used at both schools have been or are being removed to ensure there are no disruptions or delays when its time to build.

"We've had portables for 25 years and now they're on the way out the door," Marino said.

The board in August is expected to hold a required hearing on the first bond issue to raise funds.

"Then, we'll have the next two summers to do inside renovations," such as adding air conditioning, Marino said.

District 75 this past Tuesday got the ball rolling by agreeing to borrow \$8 million through bonds to pay for a variety of improvements at the district's three schools.

"I think it's a big step toward starting our projects and plans that we identified to the public," said Superintendent Bhavna Sharma-Lewis.

Besides basics like roof repair, the first phase will include bathroom renovations and new flooring; lighting and finishes in classrooms at Fairhaven School; complete rehab of the main gym/theater, boiler replacement and upgrade to heating and cooling systems at Diamond Lake School; and cafeteria/gym renovation and classroom upgrades at West Oak Middle School.

A meeting is scheduled July 27 with the architect and construction manager to discuss possible changes in the scope of the work and to consider timelines.

"We are planning next summer's work now," Sharma-Lewis said.

The school board on Tuesday also approved contracts totaling \$113,552 for demolition, and new flooring and painting for hallways at West Oak. That work began Wednesday as the first of the referendum-funded projects.

"We decided to do a little bit of work that would impact as many students and as many staff as possible," before the new year starts, Sharma-Lewis said.

The school board next month will consider a contract for card access/door security at all schools. Security cameras will follow this fall and winter.

Non-referendum projects underway include air conditioning 10 classroom at Fairhaven and eight classrooms at Diamond Lake and miscellaneous painting, flooring and lighting.

New in the mix is flood-related damage to the library, gym and corridor at Fairhaven.

"That may accelerate some of the projects we were going to do later," Yaffe said.