

# Richland School District approves \$98 million bond for February ballot

Published: August 29, 2012

By Ty Beaver, Tri-City Herald

Richland School District residents will be asked to vote in February on a \$98 million bond measure to pay for two new schools, rebuild three others and other projects.

The Richland School Board approved ballot language for the bond Tuesday night.

It also endorsed a financing plan that would increase property taxes about 34 cents, or \$34 for every \$100,000 in assessed property value.

Board members have discussed the bond since this spring. The district is contending with increasing enrollment, especially in the south and west, and with aging facilities in central Richland.

If approved by voters, the bond would pay for a new elementary school in south Richland; a new middle school somewhere west of Richland; the rebuilding of three elementary schools in the district's core area; the repurposing of Jefferson Elementary School for the Three Rivers HomeLink, a special program for home-schoolers in the district; replacing the heating, ventilation and air condition system at Chief Joseph Elementary School; and safety improvements at Fran Rish Stadium.

Board members debated the ballot language, wanting to be careful about saying where the new elementary and middle school would be going as the district hasn't secured property for the projects yet and doesn't know specifically what neighborhoods will be served.

But some board members said assigning locations to the new schools could help with voter support.

"We're in a tricky situation because our district is huge," said board Chairman Richard Jansons. "We go all the way to the Vernita Bridge."

The board eventually decided to have the two new schools described as serving the southern and western portions of the district.

John Deichman of Richland Citizens for Good Schools said the board's description of the projects would require the district to give his organization some more information in the future to help promote the bond.

"We're going to have to answer all the questions you're trying to avoid," he said.

Board member Phyllis Strickler voiced some concerns over how the bonds would be sold if they are approved by voters.

There are time requirements for when a portion of the bonds must be spent and while the state is expected to provide \$32 million in matching dollars, those funds wouldn't be provided right away.

However, district officials said there shouldn't be a problem spending money from the bond on schedule and state matching funds will come through.

"No school has never received the money. It's a matter of when," said attorney Jim McNeill.