

# Rocky Mountain News

## Question 3A seeks \$454 million to improve schools

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Published October 13, 2008 at 12:05 a.m.  
Updated October 13, 2008 at 12:13 a.m.



George Kochaniec Jr. / The Rocky

Third-graders play on equipment at Force Elementary School earlier this month. Replacing the school's playground is on the list of projects in the state's largest-ever school bond issue of \$454 million sought by Denver Public Schools.

The head of Denver Public Schools likens the playground at Force Elementary to "the surface of the moon" in one public talk, and in the sunlight of a Friday morning, it is not much of an exaggeration.

Students play soccer on a wide expanse of pea-sized gravel relieved only by a rusting blue swing set and a piece of equipment featuring metal rings on chains that is no longer allowed on some playgrounds.

When children walk back to class, they stop first to dump the pebbles out of their shoes.

"If we don't have grass, we fall and get hurt," said Angela Holguin, 8, a third-grader serving as goalie. "If we have the grass, we won't get hurt."

Grass would be among the features of a new playground at Force if Denver voters approve the school district's \$454 million bond proposal on Nov. 4. So would up-to-date playground equipment, a community garden and educational components such as a world map and a geologic timeline set in asphalt.

But what once seemed a fairly safe bet - Denver voters haven't turned down a school bond issue in more than 30 years - now seems far less certain. A plummeting economy may more than adequately stand in for a lack of organized opposition.

"This is not the easiest time or climate to be going out to ask people to support an initiative like this," DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet recently told members of the City Club of Denver.

"But Denver historically has stepped up to invest, and our hope is that we will be able to do it," he said. "The need is absolutely tremendous."

### A case of bad timing

While K-12 education funding makes up the largest single portion of the state's general fund budget, or 41 percent this year, little of that school money goes to building needs.

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State law requires districts set aside \$298 per pupil in a capital or insurance reserve fund. In Denver, that equals about \$22 million for 2008-09, a fraction of the \$454 million sought.

Vody Herrmann, the state's director of public school finance, said that "\$298 a kid doesn't go very far. It's really a minimal amount of money when you get right down to it."

So most districts, including DPS, turn to voters for bond issues every three to five years. Denver's last bond expired in 2006, and the district convened the usual citizens' group to decide what to include in a bond issue that fall.

But school board members decided to wait.

"We felt that we had to deal with our school closures," Bennet said.

"We had to deal with our fiscal situation and get our house in order before we were in a position to be able to go to the voters."

Waiting also was seen as increasing DPS' chances of success. Economist Rudy Andras found school bond dollars in Colorado average a 96 percent approval rate by the larger crowds turning out to choose a president.

But none of the years examined by Andras - 1993 to 2007 - included an economy spinning out of control.

Nor did they feature a ballot so crowded that DPS bond question 3A doesn't appear until page 4.

"I hope that you will start at the bottom of your ballot," Bennet told the City Club crowd, "and work up to the top."

## Where the money goes

DPS' bond proposal is short on glitz - only two new schools would be built - and long on the kind of major maintenance required in a district where half the schools are more than 50 years old: New boilers at 12 schools, including replacing a 107-year-old behemoth at Park Hill K-8 School, totaling \$7.2 million; roofing repairs at 34 schools and an office building, \$15.1 million; replacing windows at 28 schools, \$44.4 million.

"Frankly, it wasn't that hard to prioritize. We chose safety first," said Bill Mosher, a developer and DPS parent who chaired the citizens' group that pared the proposed bond from \$700 million to \$454 million.

In response to a request under the Colorado Open Records Act, DPS provided the *Rocky* with a spreadsheet showing how bond dollars would be spent at every school and district building.

What pops off the page in that lengthy listing are some head-scratching costs.

Why does a playground cost \$1 million? Why are replacing tennis courts at a cost of \$1.4 million a critical need? Why do lunch tables cost \$82,000 per school at 35 schools?

## Seeing the need

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Bennet agreed to a tour at schools chosen by the Rocky to answer those questions:

\* Force's \$1.05 million playground. To install a Learning Landscape, a sort of super playground, workers will first have to dig up 18 inches of soil and gravel.

They'll smooth the ground, install an irrigation system and lay sod. Part of the grassy area will be dedicated for a community garden. They'll also replace the worn asphalt.

Then come the pieces on top - the updated playground equipment and the colorful maps and number lines. But much of the price tag is in the surface, said Larry Williams, manager of facilities planning.

\* South's tennis courts. Mark Bollinger, associate executive director of facilities, said a critical need is defined as anything that has failed or will fail in the next five years - the typical life of a bond issue.

"The surface is failing," he said of South's courts. "It's eventually going to be unplayable."

The courts are pock-marked and uneven, creating water puddles.

A long crack snakes between two courts. That's because South has old asphalt courts; the district standard is concrete. The bond proposal would take out the existing courts and replace them with a single piece of concrete. That way, as the ground shifts underneath, the courts move as

one - no buckling and cracking.

\* Bromwell Elementary's lunch tables. The \$82,000 price tag would replace the school's heavy folding tables that are so outdated they can't buy replacement parts, said Danny Reid, manager of facility maintenance. The new tables would slide easily and slowly out of the walls. And the seat benches would be one long single piece, getting rid of the cracks that can pinch small hands.

"If we don't do them now, they're only going to get more expensive with time," Bennet said of the bond projects. "They're not going to solve themselves."

### Debating the issue

DPS' bond issue, the largest ever sought by a school district in Colorado, appears to be generating little heat in an election year dominated by a turbulent presidential campaign and 19 state ballot initiatives.

No one filed comments against the bond proposal for a publication by the Denver Elections Division, and the only person debating Mosher to date is former City Councilwoman Susan Barnes-Gelt, whose opposition is lukewarm.

"It's hard for me to rebut his statements because, in my heart, I agree the school district absolutely deserves our support," she said in taping a Channel 8 debate for the League of Women Voters.

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But Barnes-Gelt also raised questions about how the bond dollars advance DPS' academic mission and said the district, given the fragile economy, should have stripped the proposal of its "goodies."

That's the term she gave to the relatively small sums - \$25,000 here, \$38,000 there - that would be doled out to some schools allegedly so DPS could claim the bond was helping every school.

"This is a really, really, really bad time to ask for a property tax increase," Barnes-Gelt said.

Mosher said a bond issue, if approved by voters, would not go to market until next year. That would give some time for the economy to stabilize.

"In talking to our financial consultants, by the time this bond issue would actually go to market in the winter or spring, hopefully the marketplace would allow those issues to go forward," he said.

"Obviously, they will not go forward if the economy does not allow it."

### The cost

\* 42 cents a month or \$5.04 a year would be the cost to Denver homeowners for every \$100,000 of home value.

### Breaking down the ballot proposal

#### TOP 10 PROJECTS BY COST

1. \$48.6 million to replace fire department radio call boxes in all schools and to install or repair fire detection and sprinkler systems in 45 schools and three service buildings
  2. \$48.5 million to build two schools on a shared campus in far northeast Denver
  3. \$44.4 million to repair and replace windows at 28 schools across the district
  4. \$41.5 million to replace, repair or clean heating and cooling systems, and to equip the systems with digital temperature controls at 12 schools
  5. \$34.5 million to remodel the original 1911 building of North High School and to repair courts and fields
  6. \$29 million to install or upgrade Learning Landscape playgrounds and community gardens at 53 schools
  7. \$25.6 million to modify 44 schools to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act
  8. \$24.2 million to buy fresh paint, carpet, tile and/or wood or vinyl flooring at 74 schools
  9. \$20 million to retrofit existing schools to share space with new academic programs
  10. \$19.8 million to remodel restrooms at 27 schools
- TOP FIVE SCHOOL PROJECTS BY COST**

1. North High School, \$34.5 million, see above
2. George Washington High School, \$13.1 million,

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includes new heating and cooling system, and artificial turf on playing fields

3. South High School, \$11.8 million, includes new fire sprinkler system, tennis courts and artificial turf

4. Hamilton Middle School, \$11.6 million, includes new heating and cooling system, and windows

5. Merrill Middle School, \$11.3 million, includes new boilers, heating and cooling system, and windows

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