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School growth costs balloon by billion

By [Sandra Hong](#)
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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FORT PIERCE — The cost of building, renovating and maintaining schools to keep up with St. Lucie County's explosive growth during the next 20 years will be nearly \$1.9 billion, school district officials told the school board Monday.

That's almost twice the previous estimate of \$1 billion, which did not include the costs of upkeep.

Estimated costs

Here's what St. Lucie County School District officials say they need for the growth they expect during the next 20 years.

- Constructing new schools: \$717 million
- Renovating schools: \$416 million
- Acquiring sites, construction management: \$309 million
- Paying debt service: \$242 million
- Equipment: \$60 million
- Buses, transportation for more students: \$55 million
- District support facilities: \$33 million
- Technology: \$22 million
- Total: **\$1.854 billion**

The amount is problematic, Superintendent Michael Lannon told board members Monday night, because "when you add all the revenue streams together, we're still short."

To make up the shortfall, the board faces the dilemma of asking residents for a bond issue, which board members recently said they were reluctant to do after the region's devastating hurricanes, or risk a severe shortage of classrooms.

Without enough classrooms, Lannon said after the meeting, St. Lucie schools face the possibility of operating double shifts to accommodate students.

"Could that happen?" Lannon said. "Absolutely. In my business, that's a worst-case scenario."

This year, St. Lucie County schools grew by 2,200 students, a number that is expected to increase. Although two new schools are on track to open in the next 18 months, the district said it needs to continue opening schools at that rate to keep up with growth.

Clinging to the possibility that residents may not be averse to a new bond referendum, which would raise property taxes, board members said they will ask for more public input before deciding.

School district officials have not yet said how large a bond issue they think they will need or how much it would raise taxes.

But they are gearing up for an information campaign to tell parents and residents what



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they believe the district's needs are for the next 20 years.

The educational consulting firm Voss & Associates has a \$4,000-a-month contract with the district to help develop the campaign. So far, it and the district have come up with a list of frequently asked questions that district officials said are meant to dispel rumor and misinformation.

They said they also might present information in the form of CD-ROMs and videos at luncheons and community gatherings. Information also could come from principals and

schools and an updated district Web site, and public input could be solicited in the form of open forums and surveys.

The idea, district officials said, is to let people know what the district is facing and then hear what residents have to say.

"At this point, our next step is to go out to the community and listen, then make a decision," Board Chairwoman Judi Miller said. "We're going into this with some assumptions that this is a very difficult time to approach the community with a bond issue and a half-penny sales tax."

The half-penny sales tax, which voters approved along with a \$60 million bond referendum in 1995, will expire in June 2006.

Board members had planned to ask voters to renew that tax in a special September election, and they may ask for approval of a new bond issue, too.

The ballot to renew the half-penny sales tax in September looks likely. School board attorney Dan Harrell presented board members Monday with a draft resolution that would authorize them to do so. The board would have to decide by June for the issue to appear on a September ballot, he said.


Since there are no other elections scheduled for this fall, the school district would have to pay the costs of a special election, county Elections Supervisor Gertrude Walker said this month.

The half-penny sales tax generates about \$12.5 million annually for the district, Lannon said. But the tax, as well as other income, such as impact fees paid by developers, are not enough to keep up with what the district needs to build and maintain buildings, district officials said.

Since June, the district pocketed less than \$1 million in impact fees.

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