

APS asks voters to OK pared-down capital package

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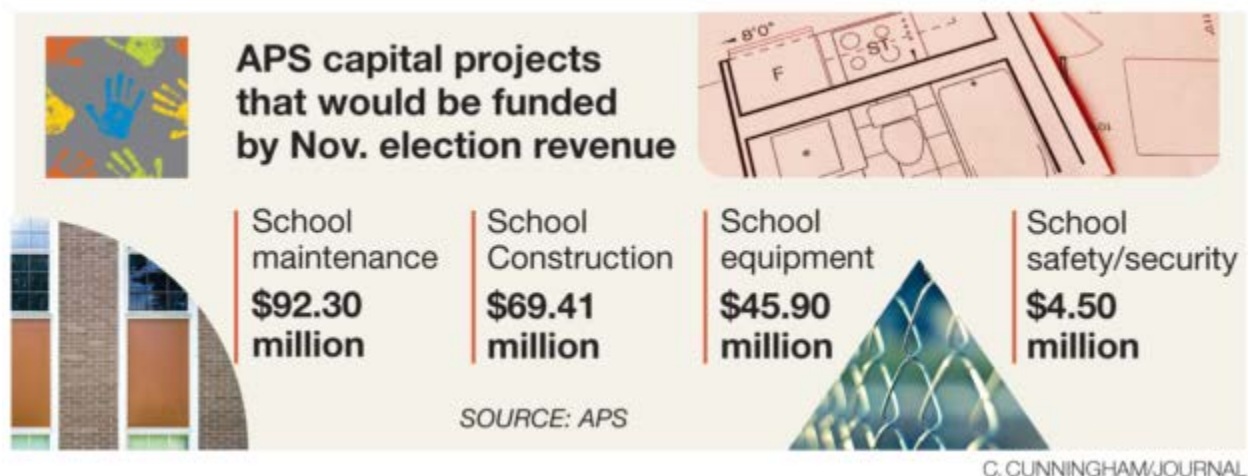
In its second attempt this year, Albuquerque Public Schools is going before voters asking for capital money – but this time with a pared-down package with no tax increase and, as a result, millions less in fiscal requests.

With the smaller ask, APS has identified 23 overall priorities ballot dollars would go to if approved, including seven construction projects at schools, turf fields, school equipment expenses and, primarily, maintenance work.

That's down from a beefy list APS had presented for its February election that had 34 construction projects alone.

After voters rejected February's \$900 million mill levy and bond package, APS decided to put a \$290 million proposal before voters in November.

APS is seeking to continue a tax or mill levy at the previous amount, which would generate \$190 million over six years. And the district is also looking to issue \$100 million of bonds over four years.



Property taxes will not increase if the district is successful, though they would decrease if the mill levy is not approved, according to Kizito Wijenje, executive director of APS' capital master plan.

Scott Elder, APS chief operations officer, stressed that the mill levy is the primary revenue source for maintenance work and that money can't be spent on operational expenses such as salaries.

Elder said the new priority list with the construction projects was created based on level of importance.

"There's a lot more need than we have capacity for ... but these were (picked by need)," he said.

For instance, he said Rio Grande High School needs to get its gym done to become Title 9 compliant. That project would receive \$5.7 million from the election money.

And the district has started work at Jackson Middle School and its Career Enrichment Center and Early College Academy that needs to move forward. Jackson would get \$9.4 million for classrooms, and \$7.6 million would go toward new classrooms at the Career Enrichment Center and Early College Academy.

Several other schools would also get money for new classrooms if voters sign off:

- Monte Vista Elementary School: \$5.4 million
- Janet Kahn School of Integrated Arts: \$25.8 million
- Lavaland Elementary School: \$8.5 million
- Navajo Elementary School: \$3.9 million

Additionally, \$3 million is slated for turf fields, which Wijenje said are projected for two high schools, two middle schools and up to five elementaries.

Other earmarked items are \$10 million to bring schools into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and \$4.5 million for security projects.

The biggest sole cost that the election dollars would go to is maintenance.

Of the election revenue, APS documents show \$92.3 million would be for school maintenance, which Elder said encompasses heating, ventilation and air conditioning, roof, infrastructure and pipe repairs.

For instance, the district says money from this election would go toward removing lead from aging pipes to ensure safe drinking water.

While APS has stressed that elevated levels of lead in schools' water has largely been resolved for elementary schools that were tested earlier this year, that's still being flagged as a funding priority.

Elder said that's included because the district has moved onto testing water at middle schools and high schools and money from the election could go to subsequent remediation.

"That work continues. That testing will continue as long as they are using brass fittings," he said.

Overall, Elder emphasized that the mill levy is crucial for maintenance, saying, "If this goes away, it's a major impact."

APS experienced the impact firsthand after voters said no to this revenue stream earlier in the year.

After the defeat, Elder said, the district took discretionary funding away from schools to help pay for maintenance projects and also used operational dollars to fill in the void, adding the district did not use reserve dollars.

School discretionary funds typically go to small projects identified by school administration such as water bottle filling stations on fountains.

These School Improvement Funds would get \$12.3 million from the November ballot. Elder was noncommittal on whether the money the district got from the SIP funds would be replenished.

If voters approve, the mill levy and bond package is also slated to go toward transportation stations, school equipment and charter schools.

The district is eyeing \$18 million for bus depots, though Wijenje said priority goes to projects that have "a life health and safety urgency as well as those that impact the most students."

Currently, APS is operating buses out of the center of the metro to get buses all over the district as well as several contractor-owned depots. The goal with the proposed depots would be to put one on the West Side, one in the southwest and one in the East Mountain area to cut down on travel time.

"If we can build these depots, we can cut down on a lot of money," he said.

Part of the mill levy money – \$30 million – is required to go to state-authorized and APS-authorized charter schools within district boundaries.

Election Day is Nov. 5. Absentee voting is Oct. 8 and early voting kicks off on Oct. 19.

The county is administering a consolidated election that includes races in Albuquerque, the villages of Tijeras and Los Ranchos de Albuquerque and other entities. In November, voters will get one ballot for the races that pertain to them based on their voter registration.

For APS, the ballot will have its mill levy, bond package and three APS Board of Education seats: districts one, two and four.

Nathan Jaramillo, bureau of elections administrator with Bernalillo County, said this election isn't expected to cost the entities anything. The state will cover the cost, he said.