

What Can We Learn From the Bond Election?

By Ken Casper

A lot of things:

- At least half the voting population is opposed to the bond.

- The school board is willing to spend taxpayer money to set things up to their own advantage, e.g., have polling stations in schools. How much did the extra polling places for early voting cost SAISD?

- Most of the residents of San Angelo aren't concerned about their taxes going up, since less than 10% voted.

As of this writing, the bond is passing by 3 votes. 3 votes! What remains to be counted are the provisional ballots. These are votes cast by people who didn't appear to meet the criteria for voting when they went to the polls. It is not a reflection on their honesty or integrity but a matter of procedure. For example, a person registered to vote but left their credentials at home. They are allowed to vote, but the ballot is not counted until the issue can be "cured," that is, they can produce their credentials to the election office within the allotted time. In most cases, the votes pass the test and are counted. In this case those votes will be critical. So, when you hear "My vote doesn't count," think again. In this case, four different votes may well decide whether your taxes go up 12% or stay the same.

The integrity in our voting system is encouraging and something to be honored.

What is discouraging is the sheer apathy of the people of San Angelo and Tom Green County. Less than 10% of the eligible, registered voters came out for this election. Hanging in the balance is a tax bill for an additional \$149M for the next 25 years. People complain about taxes, about all the money misspent and mismanaged by bureaucrats and politicians, yet 90% of them don't vote. How often have you heard people say, "Taxes are too high! Somebody ought to do something about them." That someone is you!



Few of us ever get to weigh in heavily in state elections, even less in federal elections. It's not that your vote at those levels doesn't count. It does, but as a matter of sheer numbers, each vote has less and less weight and influence. Not so at the local level. This bond issue demonstrates it most dramatically. Three votes. Three votes between your continuing to pay your current property tax bill or passing on to your kids and grandkids a total debt of \$334M for the next 25 years.

From past history we know a few other things:

- The school board, if they lose this bond election, aren't going to stop. They will be back within a year asking for \$149M, maybe more, but they will do it more subtly. As they did in 2008, after the 2007 bond failed, they will break their bond request into two or more packages to be voted on separately. When the 2007 bond request for \$125M failed, the school board came back in 2008 with a two-bond proposal: one for \$117M and another for \$32M. The first one passed. We still owe \$95M on it, as well as \$10M on the one previous to it! The second 2008 bond request for \$32M failed, but the school district managed somehow to find the money to finance the projects it contained.

- There are projects in the current bill that need to be addressed. At the top of the list is security. It is unfortunate that we have to worry about "active shooters" in our schools, but it is a reality we must face. Depending on the physical layout the optimum solution for each campus will be different. That's okay. In fact, diversity in this case can be a plus. A new bond, addressing that requirement exclusively, would be a good first step.

- The second bond should be for projects directly related to improving academic achievement. Despite public statements to the contrary, the education our kids are receiving in Texas and SAISD has been deteriorating for years. Texas was once at the top of the national list of public school academic excellence. It isn't anymore. Texas is ranked 28th among the 50 states in English and Mathematics. The second bond should pertain directly to academic achievement, like computer technology and infrastructure upgrades. (Keep in mind that bond money can only be used for physical assets, not salaries or programs.)

- Third should be the nice-to-have upgrades and improvements, athletic facilities and extracurricular assets. The \$30M, 3,000-seat multi-purpose assembly hall at Central High School would fall into this category. Will it ever get built? Maybe, maybe not. Central HS has been there for more than 50 years. According to teachers, staff, students and graduates, it's done pretty well. It would be nice to have, but right now we can't afford it.

A word about equity. In the bond proposal and discussions at public forums, equity (making sure all the schools have the same facilities and accommodations) is a major

goal. It sounds nice, but it is in fact a tall-order that will cost us untold millions of tax dollars without ever improving the education of our children and grandchildren. Case in point—

The current bond request calls for building a four-lane track at Lincoln Middle School. They currently use the track at Lake View High School a few blocks away. That means Lincoln students have to walk several blocks and cross several streets to get to Lake View. It takes a few minutes. No one has raised any safety concerns about the trek because safety has not been a problem. The justification for building a new track at Lincoln is that it is a matter of equity.

Whoa! Let's stop and think about this for a minute.

Because one school has a particular facility, every school should have one? Does that mean when/if Central HS gets its \$30M, 3,000-seat assembly hall, Lake View should get one too, as a matter of equity? How about Glenn, Lee and Lincoln Middle Schools? What this proposition creates is a never-ending “keeping up with the Joneses” race. Whenever an improvement or innovation is made at one school the bill gets written for all the other schools—whether they need them or not—as a matter of equity.

This isn't just a foolish idea; it's a bad idea. If we insist on cookie-cutter sameness, we will be focusing on the wrong thing. America was founded on the concept of equal opportunity, not cookie-cutter sameness. Lock-step, blind conformity is an enemy of individuality, innovation and initiative, the very virtues that have made America the world's leader in productivity, science and technology.

We have an opportunity with this bond to turn our attention to the things that matter, to focus on what our children really need to be successes in their future endeavors. That means academic achievement. No one is going to get or keep a good job or be accepted at a good college because of their high school football team's win record. Let's focus on what will really help them in the years after they graduate.

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