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opinion

Show me why DPS bond issue is necessary

By Susan Barnes-Gelt

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As an unrepentant urban liberal, I rarely see a bond issue I don't support. I am particularly pleased by investments in civic infrastructure: transportation, civic buildings, parks, libraries and schools.

However, in exchange for an unblemished voting record and an abiding commitment to the value of civic investment, I expect the institution asking for my money to be thoroughly prepared before seeking my vote. Make certain there are no major unresolved issues surrounding the institution. Give me all of the information regarding your assets and liabilities. And, perhaps most important, articulate a compelling vision that calls for the investment you are asking me to make.

As Denver Public Schools prepares to go to this November's ballot in search of nearly \$454 million, the district fails on several counts. It never has a compelling vision of the learning community that Denver deserves. There are a plethora of plans, tactics without strategy and no dearth of need. But to what end?

For example, why does the proposed bond include \$29 million to install Learning Landscapes in 37 outdated elementary school playgrounds? The 2003 school bond included money for Learning Landscapes. Several were installed at schools recently closed by DPS. How can we be sure that under-enrolled elementary schools that were not on the chopping block last year won't be shuttered next year or the year after?

The district faces too many significant unresolved issues. The teachers' contract remains unsettled and DPS's innovative pay-for-performance initiative, ProComp, is stalled. The administration and teachers remain at odds over its effectiveness.

A more-or-less "independent" assessment is not finished. (In addition, is the academic charged with preparing the assessment truly objective? Paul Teske co-wrote "Pay-for-Performance Teacher Compensation: An Inside View of Denver's ProComp Plan," recounting the battle to bring the pay-for-performance system for teachers to fruition.)

Absent good data, how can objective stakeholders evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the program? Resolve both the contract and ProComp before you ask me for more taxes.

In addition to the eight schools shuttered last year, DPS owns a dozen surplus properties. They include the full-block Emily Griffith Opportunity School, just west of Denver's new downtown Justice Center; a strategic piece of vacant ground adjacent to the Children's Museum in the Platte Valley; several historic elementary schools; and the long-shuttered Gove Junior High, next to National Jewish Hospital on 13th Avenue and Colorado Boulevard.

Disposition of these properties will not add up to \$454 million. On the other hand, a comprehensive, public assessment of these resources is relevant to a

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thorough calculation of capital priorities. The local Urban Land Institute analyzed 12 of the 20 surplus properties. Unfortunately, their report is not public and won't go to the school board until next week.

I am disturbed by the misleading analysis included in the recently released Citizen's Committee for Capital Needs report that suggests the owner of a median-valued house (\$230,000) will pay an additional \$12 per year if the bond passes.

But, thanks to the Gallagher Amendment, Denver's commercial properties subsidize residential taxes. The owner of a commercial property will pay three times the amount of a comparably valued residence. Is an economic downturn the right time to ask for a \$453 million school bond?

The district could address nearly all of its urgent public health and safety issues for \$273 million, under current capacity, without a tax increase. Persuade me that now is the time to spend \$180 million to:

- Refurbish the struggling North Denver high school for \$37.6 million;
- Install Learning Landscapes for \$20 million;
- Build a new K-12 school in far northeast Denver, for \$48.5 million, with no developer contribution or land dedication.

Don't take me for granted. Show me.

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