

## **RSU 18 Rome \$13.9M bond/debt update**

Everyone,

At the Wednesday August 9 school board meeting the Board voted to start the process to put a \$13.9M bond referendum on the November ballot. The following is a brief synopsis of the reasons, implications and how I voted and why. If it passes, and depending on the interest rate achieved, this will be a 7 to 9% increase in Rome School taxes that will endure for 20 years\*.

Notably our Town Selectmen were at the meeting or sent in formal letters. This is very much to their credit!

### **The pluses:**

- Approximately \$10M of this money will be used for much needed safety, building, roof, school drop off lanes and kitchen remediation. This work is long overdue.
- \$3.9M will be used to upgrade the high school (and Middle School accessible) athletic fields to synthetic turf track and field facilities. The upgrade field and track will be usable by women's and men's field hockey, soccer, lacrosse, football and track teams as well as middle school teams and club teams. I walked down these areas in person. They are not at all in good condition. I would not want to play on the football field (it has pot holes) and the field hockey field has sudden drop offs on the periphery that are dangerous. The track is nonexistent, the ambulance road is a memory of what it once was and I am told the soccer field floods in the spring.

### **Other considerations:**

- Rome will pay approximately 11.4% of cost for these upgrades while we have only 4 % of the students. This is because of how the current cost sharing formula is set up. This is on top of the fact that Rome pays the highest per student tuition of any of the five towns in the district.
- In contrast Oakland, with 33% of the students will pay only 22% of the new debt cost.
- I suggested a motion in an earlier school board meeting to ask the town of Oakland pick up 20% of the track and field cost since it will benefit their local residents as well. I was not allowed to make this motion.
- If this debt passes, Rome will have to pay for the full 20 years regardless of whether we choose to remain in the district.
- The town that will primarily benefit from the improved athletic facilities during non-school hours will be Oakland.
- The Rome and Sidney Select Boards submitted formal letters stating strong opposition to the athletic field bond referendum. The Belgrade Town Manager and First Selectman attended and were similarly concerned.
- Almost all this money is going to safety, buildings and athletics. A very small portion is directed to academics (science class rooms). Academics are where the most attention is needed.

### **Andy Cook's Perspective:**

I am very torn by this decision and referendum.

- It is for sure the case that all these improvements are much needed, overdue and in some cases (fire safety) essentially mandated. Our students need this support!
- On the other hand this will add another 7% or more to the school tax following a year when we had one of our largest recent increases in the school budget.
- And I anticipate another 3% increase in next year's budget beyond this debt.
- So if we put the two together we could see a 10% increase in school taxes, which will endure year over year.
- The Superintendent did commit, verbally, to some sort of consolidation in the Oakland facilities. That is, take the administration building, the Atwood School and the Williams school and somehow consolidate them down to two working locations plus one "storage" location. (There is space to do this by using the significant unused space in the middle school.)
- But that verbal commitment is not part of this bond motion.
- One person in Rome has contacted me to support all of this. Several have contacted me in opposition. One Rome student athlete spoke in support of the track and field project at the school board meeting. She was very eloquent and well spoken.

It was suggested by Ron Breton, one of the China Selectmen, that we break this into two bond referendums: one for the buildings (and safety) and one for the track and field. I made a motion to do this. It was seconded by Becky Seel of Belgrade. It was defeated 2-8. (I voted for it)

It was suggested by Tim Russell, a Sidney Selectman, that we delay the referendum until November, 2018 to allow the track and field boosters to raise donations. I made this motion, it was seconded and then defeated 1-9. Again I was the sole vote for this well-conceived idea by Tim.

The motion to start the bond referendum process finally passed unanimously. Yes, I voted for it. This is such an important decision that I felt I should at least allow all the voters to weigh in. Please let me know if you think I was wrong in my vote (or even right!).

I wondered why the votes went this way. My conclusion is that either:

- The board as a whole thinks all this really needs to be done and we need to get the money or
- Some of the board think if the bond number is kept high it will be defeated.

For my part I am pleased to see these issues finally addressed! And I am pleased to see a plan. And the issues need to be addressed

I am very displeased by the unequitable burden placed on Rome residents (and our historical "great families") for this debt. This could have been corrected in the cost sharing committee. Hopefully will be partially rectified in the next cost sharing committee meeting. And I am increasingly displeased with how Rome is being run over rough shod by some on the board. We seem to have only 0.7 votes when voting time comes and we have been blocked from all the board committees.

For sure those in support of the track and field upgrade will work hard to rally the vote to support the bond referendum. If others have a different perspective they will have to rally and drive out the vote to succeed in achieving another decision. Votes – either way – will make all the difference. In Rome we have about 700 voters. Typically only about 120 vote in school elections/decision.

If you are concerned (either way) I would strongly encourage you to come to one or both of the two public hearings on the bond referendum and speak. Facts and specific recommendations speak with far more impact than emotion. For example a recommendation to split the vote into two bond referendums is still potentially do able. It will require board votes - which means more than just me will have to vote for that. Or perhaps there could be a rider that if a town withdraws they don't have to carry the debt burden with them. As it stands this new debt will be a form of financial handcuffs to keep towns in the district.

Personally I remain unsure how I may vote in the general election on this referendum. I doubt I will have a recommendation for anyone as that time approaches. I think each of us will have to vote as best he or she thinks fit based on the data and knowledge they have.

I have attached the presentation the Superintendent, Carl Gartley, gave showing the basis for the \$13.9M. This is the best RSU 18 five year plan, on anything that I have seen since I became our town's school board representative. This is huge progress. You can agree or disagree on the plan but there is at least a plan to look at. I sincerely hope we will soon see something similar addressing academics.

On the good news side the Superintendent is having the chief academic officer, Keith Morin, report at every board meeting on academic progress especially on metrics. This is HUGE progress. It is wonderful! It gives me hope.

**Yours in helping our students by helping RSU 18 set the standard for academic excellence for public schools in Maine.**

## **Rome – a great place to live, and a great place to grow up!**

Dr. Andrew Cook  
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p.s. If you want to talk or have thoughts, please call me or email me!  
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\* I did this calculation myself assuming a 20 year debt, at 5% and 8% interest rates, which is paid off with a constant annual payment. I am sure we will see a far more accurate numbers in the public hearings. However they will still be of this order of magnitude.