

February 23, 2006

Dear Editor:

Monday night the Franklin County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to place a \$45 million dollar school construction bond on the May 2nd Primary Ballot. Their vote came after lengthy public input, overwhelmingly in favor of the bond. During the public comment session, many legitimate questions and concerns arose over the status of the 2004 School Bond, which was approved by more than 72 percent of Franklin County voters in the November General Election of 2004.

There seemed to be concerns from some at the meeting about the necessity of a second bond when the school system has seemingly spent so little of the first bond money. Please be confident that the Franklin County Board of Education has not been "dragging its feet," as was suggested by some in attendance. We have, in fact, been racing like a duck on a pond. While the view from the surface may make it appear that the duck is floating effortlessly across the water, rest assured that beneath the surface, we have been paddling like the dickens.

There is a process and a systematic methodology to bond-financed school construction projects. Once a bond is approved, it does not mean our school system immediately plucks \$30 million out of the sky and starts placing new buildings on school campuses.

Bonds are sold by the county to pay for the seven distinct phases of construction: pre-design; design; final review; bidding; construction contracts; construction; and move-in.

Before construction begins on projects either large or small, a number of issues must be addressed and approved by the Department of Public Instruction and the North Carolina Department of Insurance. This process involves careful inspection and consideration of construction challenges, particularly when addressing the issue of renovating existing buildings for updates, improvements and expansions. These concerns include mapping out exact plans and specifications for architectural work and design, structural and foundation considerations, civil considerations such as site conditions, grading, erosion problems and utility infrastructure, to arrangements for mechanical, electrical and plumbing configurations. In some cases, asbestos abatement at existing facilities also becomes a factor. All phases require the coordinated effort of contract architects, potential contractors, utility companies and others. Often it involves exacting research at sites with existing buildings to be certain no damage is done to existing utility infrastructure and to ensure building additions and modifications will function as planned. Each of these elements takes time before construction can begin.

Although voters approved \$30 million in bonds, only \$1.4 million in bonds have been issued so far.

That \$1.4 million completed classroom additions to Terrell Lane Middle School on time for August 2005 occupation to coincide with the first day of the new school year.

The pre-design work necessary for major construction projects at Bunn High and Louisburg High Schools are on target. Advertising bids for \$6.5 million in renovations and additions at Bunn High go out at the end of this month while advertising for contract bids in the amount of \$6.7 million for renovations and additions at Louisburg High go out the first week of March. Franklin County taxpayers can expect to see "earth move" and construction begin at Louisburg High in April with construction and renovation at Bunn High getting underway in mid-May.

By June of this year, it is estimated the school system will have spent \$21.4 million of the original \$30 million. While the process of spending the bond money might seem slowly paced, it is a pace predicated by a step-by-step process that ensures good stewardship of taxpayer dollars.

Another \$1 million in original bond money has been set aside for the land purchase to accommodate a new high school in the Franklinton/Youngsville area. The remaining \$8.6 million is to complete the financing of a new elementary school, land for the new elementary school, as well as additions and renovations at Bunn Elementary, Laurel Mill Elementary, and Youngsville Elementary. Pre-planning and

design work for all of those projects began in January of this year and remain on target for June/July 2007 completion dates.

The anticipated construction completion date for the new elementary school is the summer of 2008. This is exactly what was placed before Franklin County voters in November 2004, and it is exactly what is transpiring, as voters will consider the May 2 bond in the amount of \$45 million. Since the first bond was approved, the Board of Education has regularly provided information to the public about construction projects, phases, and progress on a monthly basis at regular meetings.

It is important that county residents understand that the Board of Education is fully aware of how critical it is to balance the needs of our school system--and these are genuine needs--with the ability of taxpayers to pay for these construction projects. That is why we have initiated the formation of a Long-Range Facilities Task Force comprised of 59 members, including a teacher and a parent from each school, the entire Board of Education, the Franklin County Schools leadership team, as well as representatives from the Board of County Commissioners and county staff. The Task Force will address long-term school facility needs and explore options and alternatives to property taxes as sole means to pay for the facilities necessary to accommodate rapidly expanding school enrollment. The first meeting of the Task Force will be Monday, February 27 at 7 p.m. at the Mitchell Media Center, Louisburg.

We look forward to informing the public of exactly what is associated with the May 2nd \$45 million Bond Referendum, just as our community-wide bond committee did two years ago with the first bond. We are optimistic that when the public recognizes the need for additional school facilities and further understands the process and time table involved, they will again show overwhelming support on May 2nd.

Sincerely,
Dr. Bert L'Homme
Superintendent
Franklin County Schools