

Bloomfield Hills district tries again to merge high schools

By Bill Laitner
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After a decade of failed bond votes and aborted plans for new buildings, officials in the Bloomfield Hills public schools are holding meetings as the district approaches deadlines this year for deciding the future of its two high schools.

"We're asking people — what's the scope of project that you want? What's the right price point?" Superintendent Rob Glass said.

Seeking comments on a bond proposal that could be on ballots as soon as May 8, officials scheduled a dozen meetings around the district, which covers all or parts of Bloomfield Hills, Troy, Orchard Lake, Bloomfield and West Bloomfield townships.

At the meetings, including one Tuesday night, educators and school board members said they're gauging support for renovating and enlarging the larger of the district's high schools, Andover, which would trigger the closure of smaller Lahser High School. Enrollments have steadily fallen at both; Andover has about 950 students and Lahser about 850.

The base cost of the renovation would be \$66 million, with a top cost of \$82 million for a full renovation with updated athletic facilities, school board trustee Ed Ford said before the meeting. He said he attended Tuesday as a parent, with children ages 13 and 16.

"We all share the concerns with the values of our homes," Ford said.

This debate in one of Michigan's most affluent school districts echoes those statewide, as countless districts wrestle with sagging property tax revenues and slashed support from Lansing, while enrollments sink.

For a dozen years, Bloomfield Hills' educators and school board members have said their two high schools must be updated. But in 2007, voters defeated a \$145-million plan to build a pair of new high schools, and in 2010, they defeated a plan for a single all-new, \$98-million high school.

Since then, the school board has said the district could not support two small high schools and still compete with larger schools in sports, performing arts and the choice of elective and advanced classes.

LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD

Residents in the Bloomfield Hills school district can attend these meetings to say whether they prefer to vote in May or November on a bond proposal for a consolidated high school and how much the district should invest.

■ **Today:** 10 a.m.-noon, Bowers Farm House, 1219 E. Square Lake Road

■ **Tonight:** 7-9 p.m., Bloomfield Hills Middle School, 4200 Quarton

■ **Feb. 15:** 7-9 p.m., Eastover Elementary, 1101 Westview

Opponents of a bond "think we're asking for the Taj Mahal and don't realize at all that our buildings are not competitive anymore," parent Neena Crimmins of West Bloomfield said.

But even if residents turn down a proposal this year, the district plans a single Bloomfield Hills High School in fall 2013, officials said.

If residents defeat a bond to build a single, consolidated facility on the Andover campus, the district will keep both the Andover and Lahser buildings open but consider them a single high school, with ninth-graders housed at the Lahser building and students in grades 10-12 at the Andover campus. The district would spend \$30 million to upgrade the buildings and \$5 million more enlarging Andover to allow three grade levels, officials said.

That plan appeals to Chris Fellin, a 15-year resident of West Bloomfield and longtime foe of any costly new high school plan. "I think that's a really good idea" to keep taxes low and avoid potential traffic congestion at a single high school, he said Tuesday. Fellin pushed for a recall of all seven school board members last fall, then dropped the effort when the group could not gather enough signatures, he said last month.

Just the transition period of two to three years between the current use of existing facilities and the opening of an enlarged Andover would be painful.

"I'm hearing from parents ready to pull their kids from the district, just to avoid that," said Fellin, whose two children attended school in the district.