

Sachem school district to vote on \$33.1M project

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Voters in the Sachem school district will decide next week on a \$33.1 million project that will finance repairs, renovations and enhancements at each of its 18 schools.

The referendum is on a project that would cover asbestos abatement, technology upgrades, playground enhancements, hot water heater replacements, security improvements and other initiatives.

Superintendent Charles Murphy and Bruce Singer, assistant superintendent for business, said the projects are necessary and would come at no additional cost to taxpayers.

The project will be funded by a \$15.1 million bond issue, as well as \$13 million from district reserves, Singer said, and \$5 million in EXCEL state funds.

In a statement, the district's Board of Education said, "We believe that all the projects outlined will provide maximum benefits to the school district community at no additional cost to our taxpayers."

The district is proposing a 2008-09 budget of \$278.8 million, Singer said, and no tax increase.

Fred Gorman, a local taxpayer advocate, opposes the project. He argued that if it isn't passed, taxpayers would receive a tax reduction because the district would have too much money in its unreserved fund balance. The district said \$8 million of the \$13 million coming from reserves is from the unreserved fund balance.

"When the law says you've got to give it back," he said, "you've got to give it back."

District officials denied that.

Singer said that if the project is not approved, the district can lawfully maintain the \$8 million.

According to state law, a district's unreserved fund balance must be less than 3 percent of its total budget. For the 2008-09 school year, the cap will rise to 4 percent, which was approved by state lawmakers. If the \$33.1 million bond passes next week, the largest chunk of funding, \$11.2 million, would go to Sachem High School North for roof replacement and other items. Another \$3.9 million would be slated for Sachem High School East.

In the middle schools, \$5.1 million would go to Samoset, \$1.9 million to Seneca, \$602,000 to Sagamore and \$118,000 to Sequoya. The 12 elementary schools would each receive between \$2.3 million and \$120,000.

Voting will take place Tuesday from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. at all district elementary schools.