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By **Maureen Downey**

Opinion: Six reasons DeKalb school board should approve new E-SPLOST project list Monday

November 29, 2016



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Allyson Gevertz was a school psychologist in Gwinnett County Public Schools before becoming the parent of children in DeKalb County public schools. She is now an education advocate in DeKalb.

In this piece, Gevertz explains why the DeKalb school board ought to endorse the project list for the renewed penny sales tax for schools that county voters resoundingly approved in May. The board vote is scheduled for Monday.

By Allyson Gevertz

Schoolchildren and school buildings are waiting for the bell to ring to start capital improvements in DeKalb County School District.

On Monday, the DeKalb Board of Education will be asked to approve the Education-Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax V (E-SPLOST V) project list, determining how \$500 million in tax dollars will be spent. In May, DeKalb County residents voted overwhelmingly (71 percent voted 'yes') to continue paying a special purpose one-cent sales tax dedicated to school improvements.

A list of specific improvement projects awaits approval by the DeKalb school board. There are six reasons the board should endorse this list devised by Superintendent R. Stephen Green and his leadership team.

1) Superintendent Green has earned our trust. DeKalb voters overwhelmingly approved the sales tax without a detailed project list in advance. Superintendent Green shared spending categories before the

vote, but asked for more time, data, and community input before listing specific projects. Voters witnessed DeKalb's new superintendent demonstrate an unprecedented level of transparency, as well as a straightforward style and unequivocal desire to put student needs first. This led stakeholders to trust Superintendent Green's judgement and give him a well-deserved vote of confidence.

2) The list addresses needs, not wants. Under the old model of determining E-SPLOST funding priorities, school board members looked at their own districts and advocated for projects based on geography. Today, the district faces more than \$2 billion in capital needs, partly because the old model led to unwise E-SPLOST spending. Now, money will follow need. The district has made it clear spending won't be equally divided by region. Instead, several projects will be concentrated in Region 1 (Dunwoody, Chamblee, Cross Keys) due to extreme overcrowding.

3) The project list is based on superior data and unprecedented community input. Development of an objective project list began long before the E-SPLOST V referendum. As early as summer 2015, engineers visited local schools to assess conditions. In the fall of 2015, local school council teams toured schools with consultants. In October of 2015, Building SPACES meetings were held in each region, gathering input on building needs. From March-September of 2016, the district conducted a secondary school study to collect ideas on addressing severe overcrowding. Public input and regional steering committee meetings, as well as community surveys, provided further information for the district. This fall, additional community input sessions/surveys gauged stakeholder priorities for building renovations, HVAC improvements, security upgrades, buses, and technology. In total, district staff spent at least 18 months studying capacity, student population projections, facility assessments, feedback from 20-plus public meetings, school council letters, steering committee input, community survey results, and ideas from dozens of parent groups. The school district has enough information to create a project list based on real needs.

4) The project list is not set in stone. Because a detailed project list was not explicitly part of the E-SPLOST V vote, the proposed list can be modified (though the overall funding categories cannot). This gives Superintendent Green and his team greater problem-solving flexibility. The district will monitor system needs, student move assumptions, and enrollment projections, as well as work with local governments and communities to study traffic and land use issues. If needs change, Superintendent Green can ask the Board of Education to vote on project list adjustments. Certain modifications can be made at the local school level. For example, to help with cost estimates, drafts of building addition designs were completed, but the actual design work will take place with local school construction committees. Communities will shape the realization of the plans at their schools.

5) This is not redistricting. The term redistricting stirs controversy in some neighborhoods. The district has been transparent through the entire E-SPLOST V process, openly stating that this improvement plan is not redistricting. Any redistricting will be a separate process, involving public hearings, beginning at least one year before new schools/additions open.

6) Citizens can influence the 2022 projections and funding needs. DeKalb County has been in the news lately because its sewer system can't handle the demands of new construction projects. Likewise, DeKalb's school district cannot handle the demands of new construction projects – the district is challenged when single-family homes are bulldozed to make way for 200-unit apartment

complexes full of school-aged children. County commissioners and city councils don't always hold zoning/planning employees accountable for including the school district in development plans. If DeKalb citizens demand county and city leaders work with the district to help schools keep pace with growth, it could have a major impact on E-SPLOST V spending plans. With smart, collaborative development, the 2022 projections might be adjusted downward and projects scaled back.

Though beneficial, the E-SPLOST V project list will not meet the needs of every school – in fact, it won't come close. Every school in DeKalb County needs capital improvements (playgrounds, kitchen equipment, HVAC, technology, etc.). Though E-SPLOST V funding won't address every need, the district developed the project list in a transparent, systematic, objective way. Stakeholders clearly understand how and why certain projects are priorities.

The school board should pass the school district's much-needed project plan on Monday, then turn its attention to other pressing matters like budgeting and curriculum development. With quick approval, the district operations staff can fast-track the most pressing E-SPLOST V priorities. DeKalb citizens should encourage the school board to move forward on the project vote without delay.

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Kirk Lunde from Facebook Dec 2, 2016

As much as I like Allyson, much of what she wrote was not correct. Dr. Green has made some great improvements and shown excellent leadership. Any trust he had earned evaporated with the lack of transparency with the whole eSPLOST V process up to now. He relies on his staff, but most of the senior staff is still the same group of incompetents which have been in the central office since Dr. Atkinson. The data used to put together the project list is severely flawed and contains numerous errors and omissions. I spoke to the BOE last February about the water coming into Midvale Elementary when it rains, however, even though there has been a work order to fix it since October 2015, the roof at Midvale received high marks and was not recommended for repair or replacement until 2025. The administration had nine months to consider that input, but the Facility Condition Assessment was never updated. The schedule of Facility Educational Adequacy Assessments was posted on the district's website two months after they started. Stakeholder input during those assessments was NOT included in the final products. Community input was done in highly controlled and filtered ways to provide the district with what it wanted to hear. Leading questions were asked and we were given two straw men to choose from (which do you support A or B?). Questions for clarification and more information were ignored. One such question is, "since the district has more than 30 trailers in storage, and budgets \$2 million each year for trailers, why are trailers included in eSPLOST V when the goal is to reduce the number of trailers?" I have been waiting for a response from Dan Drake since Oct. 13. No SPLOST project list is set in stone. The BOE has always had the authority to modify it and has on several occasions. Redistricting will be part of SPLOST V. I happen to think that is a good thing because I would rather see my tax dollars spent in classrooms than on busing students to schools which are farther away from their homes, but in their current cluster. The district did not develop the project list in a transparent, systematic, or objective way. When the Midvale School Council asked to meet with someone regarding the errors and omissions in the Facility Condition Assessment and the Facility Educational Adequacy Assessment, no one from the central office would meet with us. However, when the Lakeside School Council had questions, Joshua Williams, himself, walked the building with them and made adjustments to the Facility Condition Assessment. Where is the objectivity in that? I do not understand how or why certain projects are priorities. Apparently, the operations staff has problems with that too. The "Major System Replacement" proposed project list from October did not list Henderson Mill E.S. Fairington E.S. or Kittredge. The November list included them and dropped seven schools. Henderson Mill E.S. now is the largest project on that list. Why the switch if the process was systematic and objective? I

do not understand how Musical Instruments and Equipment got added to the eSPLOST project list when there was no mention of them at any of the community meetings. I also don't understand how musical instruments are considered capital equipment. The school board should delay voting on the the project list until the district holds 10 more community input meetings (two in each region) to listen to what we have to say about it and answer our questions.

[Like](#)[Reply](#)

[pay4play](#) Dec 1, 2016

More money on facilities but not on replacing ineffective teachers, administrators or curricula?

[Like](#)[Reply](#)

[JBBrown1968](#) Dec 1, 2016

[@pay4play](#) or people that breed not parent.

[Like](#)[Reply](#)

[Birdfanforlife](#) Nov 30, 2016

No! Ms. gevertz - this plan was done in secret and it was not approved through unprecedented community involvement. In fact it was decided with one secotor of the community (a few Ashford Dunwoody and Cross Keys participants) who secretly pushed this plan to "diversify" the cross Keys cluster by bringing in "privileged" children who are part of Lakeside. The plan will require redistricting and will almost certainly require the sagamore community to drive across I-85 and North Druid Hills Rd to go to school. This plan never took into account traffic the number 1 health issue in this city. Now we know what you are doing and we know who you are. This is a war on my community and we will not be led to the slaughter like sheep for your little social experiment.

1

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[fam4atl](#) Nov 30, 2016

And one big reason not to rush into a "YES" vote, especially on Category 2 "New Facilities and Additions". Why is Cary Reynolds Elementary School not being

rebuilt? It has 20 trailers on site and very low facility and school-climate ratings. Why is Indian Creek ES suddenly on the finalized list for a 1200-seat Elementary School? Maureen, I beg you to write an article on the learning conditions at Cary Reynolds ES and its adjoining middle school, Sequoyah MS. Public school can only work well when it works for all. The current spending and planning system is not working for Cary Reynolds ES and many other grossly overcrowded elementary schools in Doraville, Chamblee, and Brookhaven.

Like Reply

StanJester Nov 29, 2016

As a member of the DeKalb Board of Education, Region 1 is my constituency. For the record, I don't like the projects "concentrated in Region 1". Unfortunately it's just one more thing jammed down the throats of Region 1.

2  Like Reply



MaureenDownney moderator Nov 29, 2016

@StanJester Not clear who "jammed" the projects down the throats of Region 1. Do you mean the superintendent?

Like Reply



StanJester Nov 29, 2016

The Superintendent and chair set the agenda and the board approves the agenda items.

It was 5 years ago when the Region 1 Board of Education representative asked the board and superintendent to modify the E-SPLOST IV language for projects in Region 1 to no avail.

1  Like Reply



RoadScholar Nov 30, 2016

@StanJester So there is no needs in district one? Hasn't the north side been ignored by past boards?

Like Reply

L_D Nov 30, 2016

@MaureenDowney @StanJester Could you please post a link to the proposal? Thank you!

Like Reply



MaureenDowney moderator Nov 30, 2016

@L_D @MaureenDowney @StanJester
<http://www.dekalbschoolsga.org/documents/e-splst/esplost-cow-presentation.pdf>

Like Reply



L_D Nov 30, 2016

@MaureenDowney thank you!

Like Reply

insideview Nov 29, 2016

Your constituency is All the children of Dekalb county

Like Reply



StanJester Nov 29, 2016

@insideview Constituency: a body of voters in a specified area who elect a representative to a legislative body.

I represent DeKalb County, but I was elected by Region 1.

1 Like Reply

JBBrown1968 Nov 29, 2016

@StanJester For the record....you and many other people on boards of educations are killing the education of many students across this state. You are promoting your agenda on this site and proof that you are not capable of being in your position!

You and your board chose your superintendent. He is the only one that can jam anything down your throat!

People on most of these boards get so excited about the power and control and forget the mission is to promote student learning! You had no problem wining and dinning your school leader and giving out an outrageous compensation package. You and all the rest of the school board member are jokes. What are you not getting, a new field house in Region 1 .So Sad.....Your district probably does not have a reasonable school budget for teaching and learning..... or books, Why don't post the real problems?

Like

Reply



JBBrown1968 Nov 29, 2016

@StanJester Come on Stan.....no time for cold feet now. Too late to close the box now.

Like

Reply



JBBrown1968 Dec 1, 2016

@JBBrown1968 @StanJester My statements must be too close for comfort.....

Like

Reply

fam4atl Dec 3, 2016

Stan Jester, I would think you would be pleased at the scope of the projects proposed to alleviate the overcrowding at Cross Keys. I fear you worry too much about your Dunwoody constituents, where you reside and send your children to school, than the needs of all students.

Like

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About the Author



Maureen Downey

Maureen Downey has written editorials and opinion pieces about local, state and federal education policy since the 1990s.



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