

**MINUTES OF THE BUSINESS, BID, FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
BOARD OF EDUCATION, ZION-BENTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL
DISTRICT 126, LAKE COUNTY, ILLINOIS
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2025– 5:30 P.M.
ZION-BENTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT 126
BOARD OF EDUCATION PD CONFERENCE ROOM**

The Business, Bid, and Finance Committee of the Board of Education of Zion-Benton Township High School District 126, Lake County, Illinois, met in the Board of Education PD Conference Room at Zion-Benton Twp. High School, 3901 21st Street, Zion, Illinois, commencing at 5:33 p.m.

President/Chairperson Nordstrom presided.

ROLL CALL

Committee Members present: Chairperson/President Nordstrom, Member Champine, and Secretary Stephen. Dr. Rodriguez, Dr. Jim Woell, Cynthia Moreno, Dr. Chris Pawelczyk, Dr. Brown, Arturo Hernandez, and Mr. Wiland were also in attendance. Alison Andrews from Wold also attended.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

COMMUNICATIONS FROM STAFF, GUESTS, AND DISTRICT RESIDENTS

There were no public comments.

APPROVAL OF BBF COMMITTEE MINUTES

A motion was made by Secretary Stephen and seconded by Member Champine to approve the January 2025 minutes of the BBF Committee. The motion was approved by a roll call vote of committee members present, voting 3-0.

DISCUSSION ITEMS

The administration provided information on the following items for discussion:

A. Property Tax Relief Grant 6

Dr. Woell reported that the district did not qualify for the Property Tax Due Grant this year. He provided a comparison of past years: in FY23, the district ranked 18th, with the cutoff at 32nd. In 2024, the district ranked 43rd with the cutoff at 33rd, and this year it dropped to 70th, with the cutoff at 36th. Unfortunately, this trend suggests that the district is unlikely to qualify in the near future, although they will apply again. Of the 850 districts in Illinois, 707 did not apply, and 143 did, with the cutoff typically being around the low 30s. Dr. Woell acknowledged the situation as disappointing but noted it was out of District control.

President Nordstrom asked how the district should explain the shift in its ranking from #18 to #70 in a way that helps the public understand the situation, especially given concerns about tax abatements and tax rates.

Dr. Woell clarified that the change in ranking is actually positive from an economic standpoint. The district's assessed valuation (EAV) has increased due, in part, to property tax abatements, which makes the district's funding more imbalanced in relation to the tax rate, resulting in a lower ranking for the grant.

President Nordstrom emphasized the importance of educating the public about the factors within the district's control and ensuring transparency about the decisions leading to this outcome.

Dr. Rodriguez confirmed that there are plans in place to educate the public about school funding, including the impact of abatements, and that they will incorporate this explanation into future communications.

B. Property Tax Abatement Resolution

Dr. Woell reported that the district, having missed out on the Property Tax Relief Grant, is still committed to providing tax relief through a \$900,000 abatement, which will be transferred from the Education Fund to the Bond Interest Fund. This is in addition to other abatements and will help continue the board's pathway of providing tax relief. The board has expressed a desire to continue this process despite the absence of the Property Tax Relief Grant. The resolution for this abatement does not require the same reporting as the previous grants but will still require filing with the county clerk to return the \$900,000 to the taxpayers.

Member Champine expressed concern about the amount of the abatement, noting it is half of last year's and suggesting that, given the uncertain funding situation, it might be better to hold any extra funds in reserve rather than fully abate. She emphasized the need for a buffer in case there are cuts to federal funding.

Dr. Woell responded, acknowledging the concern and agreeing with the idea of holding additional funds in reserve as a precaution, particularly in light of potential funding cuts that could affect students.

President Nordstrom emphasized the importance of continuing educational efforts to help the public understand these financial decisions, suggesting that tying together the various elements of tax relief and the district's funding decisions will be helpful in responding to public inquiries.

C. CHDV Grant Update

Dr. Woell reported that the district's grant application for electric buses, originally approved for \$2.8 million, has been placed under review by the federal EPA. As a result, the funding is not currently available. While there is hope the grant may be reinstated, there is no guarantee, and the district expects to know within the next 30 to 60 days whether the grant will be restored. If the grant is not reinstated, purchasing the 10 electric buses would cost the district \$4.2 million, while the grant would have covered most of the costs, leaving the district to only cover the \$1.4 million cost of the buses themselves.

Member Champine asked if the district has the matching funds for the grant available and whether the funds would be safely invested until a decision is made.

Dr. Woell confirmed that the district has been in discussions with the treasurer and is currently exploring options to invest the funds in liquid assets to ensure they are easily accessible when needed while also helping to offset potential funding shortfalls in the future.

Member Champine then asked if the district needs to purchase the 10 diesel buses immediately or if the usual procurement timeline (2 to 4 buses at a time) could be followed.

Dr. Woell confirmed that the district does not need to purchase all 10 buses right away and will allow the funds to grow, which will help cover potential future deficits as well.

D. GRS GASB 75 Actuarial Services

Dr. Woell explained that the district must comply with accounting standards set by the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB), specifically GASB Statement No. 75, which requires an annual actuarial valuation of health and benefit funds as part of the district's audit. In the past, the district has worked with GRS, a company that provides these actuarial services.

Dr. Woell recommended moving forward with a four-year agreement with GRS instead of the usual two-year contract. This would save the district \$1,050 by locking in the current pricing for four years, avoiding price increases every two years. He mentioned that Dr. Wilkinson has been very pleased with the quality of GRS's work, and the cost is reasonable for ensuring compliance with GASB Statement No. 75.

E. Contractor Payout Request #13 Phase 2

Dr. Woell reported that the district is nearing the completion of the payouts for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the construction projects. There is one final payout left for Phase 2, and for Phase 1, the last payout will cover the installation of the storefront doors, which will be completed during spring break. He mentioned that all work related to Phase 1 should be finished before the end of the school year.

Dr. Woell sought approval for payout request #13, which will be included in the consent agenda for the February board meeting.

F. Bus Leasing Agreement

Dr. Woell explained that the district leases two types of buses each year, typically between 2 to 4 buses. The first lease covers a 72-passenger diesel bus and a smaller lift bus for handicap accessibility. The second lease is for a microbus used for activity runs and smaller routes with fewer students. These leases are part of the district's ongoing strategy to maintain a reliable fleet of buses.

The lease agreements are structured so that the district doesn't make the final payment to own the buses. Instead, the leasing company buys the bus back and sells it, which helps the district save on maintenance costs and ensures safety compliance. This practice aligns with industry standards for districts that lease or own their buses.

G. Vision 2030 Resolution

Dr. Rodriguez provided an overview of the Illinois Vision 2030 resolution, which focuses on three main areas: future-focused learning, shared accountability, and predictable funding. He emphasized that predictable funding is the most crucial element, especially given the challenges faced by the district with federal and state funding. Over 300 school districts have already supported this resolution.

Dr. Rodriguez discussed the projected \$3.2 billion shortfall for the state in the upcoming fiscal year, alongside flat revenue and increasing spending. He mentioned the importance of funding for education, particularly with the state's evidence-based funding model, which has seen over \$2.1 billion in new funds since its establishment.

Regarding the proposed \$350 million for evidence-based funding, he acknowledged that some might argue this amount isn't sufficient but emphasized that more funding is needed to ensure the adequacy of education. He also noted that while some view the governor's potential presidential bid as a controversial aspect of the discussion, the main focus remains on securing funding for education.

President Nordstrom asked if there was anything controversial about the resolution or Illinois Vision 2030 that the board should be concerned about.

Dr. Rodriguez stated there was nothing controversial within the resolution itself. He mentioned some concerns about the governor's potential presidential aspirations but clarified that the resolution's focus remains on funding and educational goals. He concluded by noting that the governor's budget address on February 19 would be key and that the board should pay attention to any developments, particularly regarding taxes and funding decisions.

Other Items

A. Capital Improvements Update

Dr. Woell provided an update on the capital improvements, highlighting several key developments. The library doors are now securely locked after the long-awaited installation, which had been delayed since August. Additionally, the fire-rated side lights have been successfully installed across the building, marked with orange stickers for easy identification. The final major task is the installation of storefront doors, which is scheduled for spring break. The furniture package is nearly complete, with just one piece—the stands for the new keyboards and piano—still pending. Once that arrives, the furniture will be fully set up, and the project will be near completion.

B. Facilities Master Plan Update

Alison Andrews provided an update on the Facilities Master Plan, emphasizing the ongoing progress toward bringing a formal recommendation to the board in March. She highlighted recent developments, particularly after the New Year, including the creation of need statements and investment strategies based on emerging themes. These strategies aim to address identified needs, focusing on safety, learning spaces, physical education, and community engagement. The stakeholder feedback, including from student groups and community surveys, revealed alignment across various stakeholders on key priorities. Andrews also introduced the "opportunity diagram," a visual heat map that categorizes needs and strategies by importance, with color coding to represent different categories and investment levels. The goal is to ensure a balanced, realistic approach to addressing long-term district needs, with an eye on what can be achieved in the next 5 to 10 years.

As we move further into the interior spaces, we will see a more significant use of colors such as greens, blues, and yellows. These color choices are intended to create distinct environments for students, staff, management, and collaborative spaces. For example, light green tones will be used to update finishes in the learning environments. This is in line with our ongoing efforts to enhance the learning spaces by improving the furniture, technology, and overall finishes. Some of the updates have already been made, which can be seen in the areas marked with a hatched pattern. These are areas where previous work

has been invested in over the past several years and where further improvements could be considered.

The areas highlighted in light green represent spaces where additional updates, such as finishes, technology, and furniture, are still needed. The triangular classrooms, which have been highlighted in a darker green, are of particular concern. Many of the feedback responses we've received point to issues with the functionality and the size of these spaces. The challenge is to improve these areas to ensure they are more equitable, flexible, and adaptable, which is a priority for creating a better classroom environment compared to other rectangular spaces.

Dr. Rodriguez reflected on the past decisions related to classroom designs, particularly the challenges posed by the triangular classrooms. As a result of these limitations, some courses and spaces have been moved around in the past to make better use of space. For instance, the district has made adjustments by relocating industrial arts to science rooms and eliminating many of the triangular classrooms. But there are still a number of these spaces that need attention.

Alison Andrews explained that the original design of these spaces, especially the library area, had an open-concept, central hub idea. This design allowed for a lot of open space, with classrooms and other areas floating around. However, while this design may have seemed logical at the time, it ended up creating smaller spaces that no longer meet the needs of today's education system. The need for larger, more flexible spaces to facilitate collaborative learning has grown, and the current triangular classrooms no longer serve that purpose efficiently.

As the conversation continued, it was noted that these space limitations are especially challenging when there are large class sizes, sometimes as many as 32 students. In many of these classrooms, even with added technology like a second monitor, the physical layout is difficult to adjust in order to accommodate the needs of students and teachers.

President Nordstrom recalled that the triangular design was part of the original building from the 1970s, and while it may have made sense at the time, it is now a significant obstacle to modern learning methods. Alison Andrews mentioned how this type of design was more common in that era, as the focus was on open spaces and informal layouts. However, the needs of today's classrooms are very different, and the space configuration is less conducive to modern teaching methods.

Regarding the overall strategy, Alison highlighted that the work being done is focused on identifying areas that need improvements, not necessarily finalizing the design. This process is more about envisioning possible solutions and strategizing how to address the various challenges, including flexible classroom layouts and modern technology integration, to ensure that the space meets the demands of both current and future educational practices.

Andrews provided insights on the necessary updates to improve classroom environments, including removing operable partitions that hinder learning due to poor acoustics and introducing more flexible learning spaces. The focus is on creating an equitable

experience across both facilities by ensuring operational efficiency, student and staff management spaces are welcoming, and science labs have flexibility.

Key priorities discussed:

- Classroom finishes: Updating the look to ensure consistency.
- Restrooms: Upgrading existing ones and increasing their numbers.
- Physical education & athletic spaces: Providing air conditioning to handle hot days.
- Locker rooms: Improving environments for students.

She acknowledged that certain projects, like restroom updates, are already approved for the 2026 renovation. Further strategic updates, like electrical system improvements for future electric buses and enhanced security (lighting and cameras), were also mentioned.

The plan is to focus on high-priority strategies and develop a phased approach to these updates. The initial steps involve working on high-level costing and aligning the strategy with the district's financial plan. The ultimate goal is to build a master plan that allows flexibility, enabling the district to adjust priorities if necessary.

Dr. Rodriguez highlighted the importance of managing costs and aligning the project phases with the district's financial strategy. He emphasized that the ability to pause or adjust projects based on funding will be key.

Member Champine suggested focusing on ensuring that the public is aware that the district listened to their feedback, especially regarding the air conditioning issue in gyms, which came as a surprise to some. The prioritization exercise conducted in town halls is seen as a valuable way to engage the community and ensure their input is considered.

President Nordstrom agreed, noting that even though public participation was smaller than expected, common themes emerged, validating the focus areas. The discussion emphasized a collaborative approach where the community feels their needs are heard and addressed in the master planning process.

The next steps will focus on refining strategies, with a clear plan to emphasize instruction, safety, and social-emotional learning alongside the physical infrastructure. The district plans to remain adaptable, preparing for opportunities that may arise suddenly and ensuring the funding strategy is flexible to accommodate unexpected needs.

ADJOURNMENT

President Nordstrom adjourned the meeting at 6:34 p.m.