

Miami Herald staff writers Clarissa Buch, Lidia Dinkova, Nadege Green, Sabrina Rodriguez and Jenny Staletovich contributed to this report.

POLITICS

Voters approve \$1.2 billion bond issue for schools

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Voters approved the \$1.2 billion bond referendum for Miami-Dade schools, according to preliminary election results.

The measure aims to fix problems at aging Miami-Dade schools, suffering from delayed maintenance and few capital dollars, and also improve technology across the district. The money, borrowed from bond investors, would be repaid with property taxes over 30 years.

Its approval is a major win for Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, who proposed the measure to the School Board in August and took a lead role in stumping for the bond in a fast-paced campaign.

At a watch party at Miami Senior High in Little Havana, high school cheerleaders and marching band members celebrated as results came in, together with School Board members, district administrators and parents.

Carvalho said now the hard work of implementing the program starts. He pledged to fulfill every promise that was made on the 82-day campaign.

“We’re going to deliver these projects on time and under budget,” he told a crowd.

The last time voters approved a bond, in 1988, there were massive delays and wasted millions in the construction program.

The first issue of bonds is expected in the summer of 2013 — \$200 million. Carvalho has said the bulk of the work will be done in six to seven years.

But the school district has yet to publish an official timeline or budgets for projects, which Carvalho said in October district employees were working to produce before the Election Day.

A political action committee called Building for Tomorrow raised a war chest of more than \$1 million, according to the latest finance report.

The political group spent thousands on radio advertising, automated phone calls, mailers that showed kids thinking ‘If I could build a school’ and rented space at public schools for forums. The Miami-Dade school district ordered principals to send fliers explaining the bond home with students.

Some teachers protested outside the last town hall forum on the issue in Doral last week.

But overall, the campaign faced little organized opposition.

It leveraged the district’s track record under Carvalho: improved academic standing with the state, no more ‘F’ high schools, improved finances despite the recession and better relations on the School Board.

The bond issue got an unexpected boost in October when Miami-Dade County Public Schools won the prestigious Broad Prize, a national award that recognizes high-performing urban school districts.

The referendum received support from a range of local politicians, including Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez, whose wife is a school administrator; Hialeah Mayor Carlos Hernandez, and Miami Commissioner Francis Suarez.

With its passage, homeowners will pay more in property taxes. For the first year, 2013, homeowners would pay \$5 per \$100,000 of assessed value for the new bond, in addition to the \$23 for every \$100,000 of assessed value for the existing bond. That program was passed in 1988 and ends in 2017.

For the entire period of the new bond, a homeowner would pay an average of \$27 for every \$100,000 of assessed value each year, with a maximum of \$35.

Iona Coombs, 68, a retired nurse in North Miami, said that increase was worth it if run-down schools will be fixed. “We have so many schools that need repair,” Coombs said. “They need help.”

Jacquelyn White, a 44-year-old marketing consultant, said she’d support any initiative to put more money into public education.

“I have a little one who is already in preschool and this will affect him in the future,” said White, who was reading to her 4-year-old son while waiting to vote in Brickell.

For some voters, the taxes were too much or they didn’t trust the district.

Neil Schwabe, a 41-year-old insurance agent, voted against the measure. He said the district has mismanaged construction money in the past and would prefer the district do modest repairs to its existing infrastructure. “We should improve on what we have, not build something new,” he said.

For Joel Delgado, a 24-year-old accountant, the bond referendum was the biggest issue on Election Day.

“Obviously, it is important to vote for president, but I feel that in this election we need to worry about what’s closer to home,” said Delgado, a Hialeah Miami Lakes Senior High graduate. “This bond is going to affect the future of students in our neighborhoods, and that is what matters most.”

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