HUUSD Bond Proposal
Why did the Board decide to do this now?

SHORT ANSWER

The Board has been talking about the need for a major investment in repairs and improvements at the high school for years, but only recently came to agreement on how best to do so. Although it is a challenging time to ask our community to pay for this, waiting longer delays repairs, increases costs, and prolongs the time our students go to school in a building that does not meet the needs of today's learners.

LONGER ANSWER

In 2015, the old Harwood School Board recognized the need for a major investment in the building, which had already served our community for 50 years at that point. However the state's Act 46 legislation shifted everyone's focus to the challenge of merging all 6 towns into one school district and the bond work was set aside.

In 2018, the new, unified Board again returned to the question of a bond for the high school. However, the Board disagreed about what to do with the middle school portion of the building. Questions of whether the 7th and 8th graders would remain in the building, whether that portion of the building would be improved or not, had major effects on the bond the district would be looking for.

In 2019, the Board tried to resolve the middle school question by switching its focus and looking at long-term planning for the whole district. The Board concluded that all 7th and 8th graders should be brought together at CBMS in order to provide the same high quality educational opportunities to all students in our district and realize operational savings at the same time. (This document synthesizes the information the Board was using in one place.)

In 2020, the Board asked our school leaders to resume their work thinking about improvements and changes that needed to be made to our buildings to both protect the community's investment in the high school and to plan for the best educational opportunities for the next generation of our community's children. Building off of research and planning for the bond that had been done in earlier years, the middle school and high school principals worked with the district's facilities director to fine-tune a list of projects deemed essential for our district and our children's educational opportunities.

During 2021, the School Board has worked to understand the costs of construction, the effects a bond would have on property taxes, and the best timing for putting a question before voters.

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Some people have asked if the project could just be completed using the maintenance reserve fund. The district has worked to maintain a reserve fund of between $1 million - $2 million for the last several years which it uses to care for all seven of its campuses. This is nowhere near enough to cover just the past due repairs and compliance issues at Harwood, which are projected to cost $22 million. The Board has repeatedly affirmed in its votes that a bond is the most cost-effective way to address the repair and improvements needed at the high school.

Many people have noted that the construction costs have spiked during COVID. Some have suggested the district wait until prices return to “normal” before proceeding with the bond. In speaking with industry experts, however, the following points have been made:

- It is not clear if prices will ever return to pre-COVID levels.
- As of August 2021, materials prices had already begun to lower, though were still above pre-COVID levels.
- If the bond is passed, projects would not go out to bid until late 2022 and early 2023, which will hopefully allow market prices to decrease further before the district starts committing its funds.
- Our district’s history of waiting to do the work has proved that waiting is in fact an expensive proposition (because the high school’s 55-year old infrastructure continues to age and break, and more items need repair or replacement). The size and cost of the first bucket of “compliance and repair” projects, for example, has grown from $14 million in 2015 to $22 million in 2021.

Waiting longer to do the project is not actually likely to cost us less money, but it does mean that our students continue to use a school building that is desperately in need of repairs and improvements. In May of 2021, the Board overwhelmingly voted to put the question of a bond for improvements at the high school and an addition to CBMS before voters in November 2021. In September the Board finalized the size of the bond request and the list of projects that would be included in the request.