



## Measure 26-121 listening session summary: A progress report on feedback

Following the defeat of Measure 26-121, a school construction bond that was narrowly defeated in May, 2011, Superintendent Carole Smith and members of the School Board began holding “listening sessions” with individuals and groups who had supported or opposed the bond.

These individuals have included business leaders, school principals, teachers and other educators, school custodians and maintenance staff, parent advocates, elected officials, neighborhood association leaders, architects and construction professionals, small business owners and others. Listening sessions were convened by organizations, as well as informal groups of individuals. The superintendent attended every listening session. Nearly all listening sessions were attended by at least one school board member.

The superintendent and school board members asked participants three common, open-ended questions: *What are your reflections on the bond? How could it have been improved? What are your ideas for moving forward?*

The conversations have been frank and helpful in determining how Portland Public Schools proceeds with the task of upgrading our school facilities, which continue to need safety and security upgrades, and improvements to support today’s teaching and learning.

### Summary

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Some major themes emerged from the listening sessions:

- **Schools need upgrades:** Everyone who has participated in the listening sessions acknowledges that our schools need to be upgraded, whether they supported the last bond or not.
- **Future bond proposals need more buy-in:** Participants expressed a desire to see the next bond enjoy deeper buy-in and broader support. Parents, teachers and principals also said they wanted more input into projects proposed at their schools.

People shared many suggestions for the focus of the next bond, but the discussions to date have not reflected any consensus on what the next proposal should include.

- **Mixed opinion about why the bond failed:** There are many different views on why the bond did not pass.
  - Many listening session participants attributed the result to the state of the economy.

The superintendent and school board members also heard clearly that:

- Some community members had trouble supporting the bond because they had wanted more of an opportunity to participate in the development of the proposal, before Measure 26-121 was referred to the ballot.
- Some listening session participants said they wanted to connect the bond to an educational vision for our community, as well as a long-range facilities plan that would support that vision.

- **Mixed opinion about how the bond proposal could have been focused:** There were many different views on ways that Measure 26-121 could have been improved.
  - Some participants expressed the opinion that the bond proposal focused too much on a small number of schools that would have been fully rebuilt.
  - Others believed that the bond proposal was spread “too thin,” in an attempt to deliver improvements at every school.
- **Mixed opinions about PPS priorities:** There were many different and often conflicting views on Portland Public Schools decisions to stabilize programs and manage resources.
  - Some participants expressed the perspective that PPS should have closed more schools.
  - Others strongly believed that PPS has closed too many schools.
  - Some participants indicated that PPS should have spent more to maintain school buildings and expressed concern about on-going maintenance capacity.
  - Others felt that state and federal budget cuts have hurt the classroom and that PPS should prioritize funds to keep class sizes down and preserve programs.

## **Concerns expressed about the Measure 26-121**

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Below are some specific points of feedback the superintendent and school board members heard in the listening sessions that have been held to date.

- Package was too large, without a clear and defined focus. The range of program components made it vulnerable to being easily “picked apart.”
  - Field replacements and covered play structures were cited as examples of specific program components that many community members questioned.
- The bond needed to address seismic issues in light of the Japan quake and tsunami (beyond seismic improvements that were incorporated into school rebuilding projects).
- Some participants stated that the “kitchen sink” approach of providing common upgrades at every school did not resonate with the community.
- Other participants stated that it wasn’t clear why large portions of the budget were dedicated toward rebuilding 9 schools, while other schools received significantly less.
- The bond should have been focused on rebuilding schools with the “worst” facilities conditions first.
  - Some participants did not see clear criteria in how schools were selected for full rebuilding.
  - Some participants also objected to the inclusion of specific schools in the package (e.g., Lincoln, Jefferson and Marysville).
- Some participants believed that asking voters to approve both a bond and levy were too much of a financial burden to put forward at one time. In a similar manner, the overall cost of the bond was identified as an issue, especially given current economic conditions in Portland.
- Many participants raised concerns about the process in developing Measure 26-121:

- The school district moved too quickly to referral after it received encouraging polling results in fall 2010. There needed to be a longer public process to vet the proposal and build community support.
  - Many listening session participants indicated that they wanted to be part of a meaningful process and shape something better. Many listening session participants felt they were not given any opportunity to do that.
  - Some participants who opposed the bond indicated that they didn't understand some of the complexities of the bond design. Some suggested they might have come to other conclusions had the school district reached out to the community in a broader way, initially.
- Teachers wanted to see the bond proposal reflect their input about the specific facilities needs at their schools.
- Parent leaders were fatigued by long-standing and continuing school funding battles and did not engage as they have in times past.

## **Perceptions about Portland Public Schools**

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- Concern over the district's ability to get everything done in 6 years.
- Lack of ongoing maintenance plan damaged and weakened potential support in the business, civic and school communities.
- School district needed to more directly tie student achievement and graduation rates to facilities improvement.
- School district needed to better explain where it is headed and to help the public understand the Milestones and reform strategy, and how that ties to the bond.
- Parents and community cared more about academics rather than buildings.

## **Suggestions for next bond**

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- There is broad agreement that schools need to be upgraded.
  - According to one participant: "Everyone agrees that schools are in bad shape. Don't be gun-shy about asking for another bond measure."
- A future bond proposal needs clearer criteria as to why specific schools are chosen for rebuilding or major upgrades.
- Portland Public Schools should have a "transformational roadmap" that is clear to the public.
  - One listening session participant said, "This is the time to be inspirational and aspirational. People want to believe and want to be excited about education."
- Portland Public Schools needs a strategic facilities plan, which connects the number and size of schools to projected enrollment.
- Teachers wanted to support the bond, but they want to be more involved in the development of the next bond proposal at the beginning.

- The school district should expand outreach efforts, particularly in explaining technical components of the bond:
  - Listening session participants hoped that future bond proposals would enjoy the support of (as one participant put it) “an army of ambassadors.” Participants encouraged the school district to engage neighborhood associations and other civic organizations more fully.
  - The ‘pay-as-you-go’ funding mechanism was compelling to listening session participants, but was difficult to explain. Participants recommended the development of a simple white paper to explain it.
  - Listening session participants wanted the school district to provide more information about how the bond could boost the economy and put people back to work.

## **Conclusion**

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PPS is currently conducting a Long Range Facilities Planning process, and will engage the community in a discussion about the future of our school buildings. We will share information regarding building conditions and recognized best practices for school improvement. Any future bond referral will be informed by this process. We will look for public input in determining when this referral occurs and the priorities it addresses.