



**EMERSON SCHOOL DISTRICT  
BOND REFERENDUM  
OCTOBER 2, 2018**

# Frequently Asked Questions

## **Q1 Why is Emerson Public Schools holding a bond referendum in 2018?**

**A1** The Emerson Public Schools Board of Education considered several factors when deciding to move forward with a bond referendum: The in-depth analysis of the 2015-2020 District Strategic Plan and subsequent Facilities Review showed that significant building construction was necessary to address pressing concerns about classroom situations, to maintain a high level of student success, and to grow as a district. The Facilities Review process identified key areas that were sorely lacking and recommended a district referendum as the best means to maintain the quality of Emerson schools. The Board of Education recognizes the strong connection between public school quality and the housing market's strength and vitality. A bond-funded building initiative would ensure the quality of every Emerson student's experience and continue to bolster real estate values.

## **Q2 What are the benefits of a facilities expansion and renovations project?**

**A2** There are a number of important reasons to implement a facilities expansion and renovations project now. A facilities expansion and renovation project would address the pressing need to build, renovate and upgrade key areas in all three of the district's schools. The current bond/lending environment enables the district to take advantage of low-interest rates and to spread the cost of this project over 20 years. Emerson's bond proposal is shaped around student needs, but it also considers the reality that school quality is a driving factor in property values. In a competitive real estate market, all homeowners benefit from schools that continually evolve to meet or exceed instructional goals.

## **Q3 What is the total cost of renovations and upgrades?**

**A3** The total cost of the renovations and upgrades are estimated at \$13,368,446. With voter approval, estimated state aid will contribute about \$2,389,062 over the life of the bond, reducing the local share to \$10,979,384. This school improvement plan would have a tax impact estimated at \$23.00 per month (\$276 per year) for a home assessed at the borough average of \$439,049.



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## **Q4 What projects are included in the proposed referendum?**

**A4** Here's a school-by-school summary of the most significant improvements proposed in this referendum: [www.emersonschools.org/plans](http://www.emersonschools.org/plans)

## **Q5 How has enrollment become a factor in this referendum?**

**A5** Current enrollment is 1,150+ students in Pre-K – Grade 12. Trailers were installed at Memorial Schools six years ago to help manage class sizes, but what was expected to be a temporary enrollment condition has proven to be permanent. Our community is attractive to home buyers, in large part because Emerson has invested in high-quality schools. We believe that trend will continue, and we need to address enrollment levels to maintain the high quality of education that is a point of pride in this community.

## **Q6 Why doesn't Emerson use the classroom space that is currently occupied by Bergen County Special Services and/or purchase the empty Assumption Elementary School?**

**A6** Emerson Public Schools rents classroom space to Bergen County Special Services, and that agreement provides significant revenue for the district's annual budget. But the space would be insufficient to address the district's needs. Ending the rental agreement would reduce district revenue but not solve the problem. The district explored purchasing Assumption School, but the costs of serving students at a separate location (site purchase, necessary renovations, additional staff) proved to be prohibitive.

## **Q7 Is Emerson eligible for state aid for this referendum project?**

**A7** The district would be eligible to receive \$2,389,062 in state aid for renovations and additions to Memorial and Villano schools, and to the Emerson Junior-Senior High School. The state aid would reduce the local tax share. State aid is available only if the referendum passes; it is not available for projects completed within the annual budget.

## **Q8 Will the referendum affect the amount of annual state aid given to Emerson Public Schools?**

**A8** No, the referendum would not affect the annual state aid given to Emerson Public Schools. The annual amount combines transportation and per-pupil aid, and is completely unrelated to the referendum.



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## **Q9 What led to the decision to hold a bond referendum in 2018?**

**A9** The need for a bond referendum grew out of the 2015-2020 District Strategic Plan. New Jersey School Boards Association guided a district-wide process over several months. It brought together students, staff, administrators, parents, and community members as they identified district strengths and challenges, developed a vision for the future, and set district goals and objectives. Once the strategic plan was adopted, an ad-hoc, citizen-led Facilities Review Committee of parents, teachers, community members, staff, and school board members conducted a district-wide, comprehensive review of Emerson's facilities. The committee presented its recommendations during a public school board meeting in August 2016, and the board initiated further study. In the spring of 2018, the school board approved a modified plan for a referendum vote on October 2, 2018.

## **Q10 What were the purpose and objectives of the Facilities Review Committee?**

**A10** The Facilities Review Committee, consisting of parents, teachers, community members, staff, and school board members, was charged with exploring Strategic Goal #5: Improve facilities to accommodate growth, modernization, flexibility, and health and safety for staff and students. From their work, the bond referendum was proposed to address the removal of the Memorial trailers, provide appropriate settings for small-group and related services, and build necessary additions onto Emerson's schools.

## **Q11 What were the findings of the Facilities Review Committee?**

**A11** The Facilities Review Committee determined that meeting Strategic Goal #5 required: Addressing current and future facility needs through a districtwide referendum. Relocating the Pre-K program from trailers. Relocating classrooms from the basement of Villano School. Providing appropriate instructional areas for small groups that currently meet on the stage, closets, hallways, basements etc. Modernizing the EJSHS Science labs built in the 1960s. Improving the aesthetic appearance of the high school.



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### **Q12 What was the overall recommendation of the Facilities Review Committee?**

**A12** The Facilities Review Committee recommended that the district “undertake the proposed building/renovation project utilizing state grant funding and local support (referendum/long-term bonding) to improve and expand facilities to accommodate growth, modernization, flexibility, health and safety for the children and community of Emerson.” After accepting the initial report in August 2016, the Emerson school board evaluated the findings, scaled down the recommendations significantly, and took steps to put a package of priority items to a public vote.

### **Q13 The district may need a referendum to pay for new construction, but why can't renovations and repairs be made within the annual budget?**

**A13** Most homeowners use long-term funding to cover large-scale improvements, and there are even more reasons for a school district to use this approach. The use of bonds spreads the cost of the upgrades and repairs over 20 years at a historically low-interest rate. This approach is similar to a home mortgage or home equity loan. State law caps school revenue for daily, operating expenses at 2% a year -- a restriction homeowners don't have to contend with. Renovations and repairs wouldn't fit inside that limit, but bond payments are calculated separately. A real game-changer: The state covers some of the costs only if the renovations and repairs are funded through a bond. State aid is not available if the projects are completed within the everyday operating budget.

### **Q14 What is the 2% tax levy cap, and how does it play into the decision to seek a bond for large-scale costs?**

**A14** Since 2010, New Jersey law has put a 2% cap on school property tax revenue. All school districts find it challenging to fit everyday cost increases (payroll, supplies, contracted services, etc.) in that 2% cap, let alone higher expenses like building improvements. But payments for long-term debt like bonds don't count toward the cap's calculations. That's one reason schools use bonds to pay for large-scale improvements. The other reason is that the state will contribute toward capital improvements funded through a bond referendum -- \$2,389,062! That state funding is not available for capital projects completed within the annual operating budget.

### **Q15 Why hold a bond referendum separate from other elections?**

**A15** A special referendum lets voters focus their attention on the specific requests and needs of the school district, without the possible distraction of candidates and other issues that arise in a general election.



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**Q16 When would the renovations begin and when would they be completed?**

**A16** With voter approval on October 2, 2018, the district would immediately begin the process of construction documents and code reviews. Construction could begin during the 2018-2019 school year. The entire project would be substantially completed by September 2020.

**Q17 If voters approve this proposal, how will Emerson Public Schools ensure that educational programs and student/staff safety are maintained during construction?**

**A17** Emerson Public Schools will rely on an experienced construction management team that specializes in working with school facilities. They will work with our architect to develop appropriate plans and timelines, all focused to ensure that instructional time and extracurricular activities are minimally impacted and that students and staff are safe while our schools are improved.

**Q18 What is the outcome, if voters reject the referendum?**

**A18** If voters say no to this school improvement plan, Emerson students will continue to be educated in basement areas and other substandard educational spaces. The district will have to seek annual county approval to use the temporary trailers that have been in place for six years. Villano School band students would crowd onto a stage for instruction, and Memorial School would continue the use of rolling carts for art, music, and Spanish. Current and future Emerson students would experience science instruction in 1960s-era labs. The district would fit only the most pressing improvements into its operating budget, and lose two million dollars in available state aid.

**Q19 If voters approve this plan, how would the district select a contractor?**

**A19** All governmental contracts – state, county, local or school district – are put out for public bid and awarded to the lowest responsible bidder. Eligible contractors are issued certificates when they register with the State Department of Labor and Workforce Development's Division of Wage and Hour Compliance. Contractors submit their weekly payrolls when they request payments, and state compliance officers review them. Contractors who do not comply with the rules lose their certificates and are banned from bidding on future government contracts. The State of New Jersey does not require contractors of public works projects to hire union-only contractors; however, prevailing wage rates must be paid on public works projects and for state building services.



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**Q20 What will the tax impact be on Emerson homeowners?**

**A20** With voter approval, this school improvement plan would have a tax impact estimated at \$23.00 per month (\$276 per year) for a home assessed at the borough average of \$439,049.

**Q21 What happens if the total cost of the projects is less than the amount detailed in the October 2 referendum?**

**A21** State law requires Emerson Public Schools to return all unused bond proceeds to the taxpayer in the form of tax relief. EPS would not be permitted to use bond proceeds for projects other than those approved by voters in the referendum.

**Q22 What if the actual costs of the projects exceed the amount detailed in the October 2 referendum?**

**A22** State law prohibits Emerson Public Schools from spending more than the amount approved by voters in the bond referendum. The district and its expert advisors believe the overall plan includes prudent estimates. However, in the unlikely event that actual costs exceed bond proceeds, the school board will work with the architect and construction manager to develop more efficient means of achieving the referendum's overall objective and/or reduce the scope of work. Emerson Public Schools administration and the Board of Education stress and require cost-efficiency with its professionals.

**Q23 How will the proposed referendum affect taxes for senior citizens?**

**A23** Seniors and people with disabilities may be exempted from future property tax increases by applying for the Property Tax Reimbursement Program (Senior Freeze). Further information can be found on the NJ Division of Taxation website:

<http://www.state.nj.us/treasury/taxation/ptr/eligibility.shtml> Interested residents may also call the NJ Division of Taxation at 1-800-882- 6597 for further information.

**Q24 When do voters have to be registered in order to vote on the referendum?**

**A24** Voters must be registered by Tuesday, September 11, 2018. Registration forms are available at all Emerson Public School offices, or on the district website. Click on the Referendum tab on the homepage, which will take you to the following link:

<http://www.co.bergen.nj.us/elections>, for a downloadable voter registration form and instructions on completing and returning the form by the September 11 deadline.



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**Q25 When and where will the community vote on this referendum?**

**A25** The Emerson community will VOTE on Tuesday, October 2, 2018. Voters will go to their regular polling districts to vote that day between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m. All “vote by mail” ballots have to be received by the County Board of Election before the polls close

**Q26 Are Vote by Mail ballots available?**

**A26** Yes. Vote by Mail ballots are available and can be found at Emerson Public School offices, or on the district website. Click on the Referendum tab on the homepage, which will take you to the following link:

[http://www.nj.gov/state/elections/form\\_pdf/vote-by-mail-forms/vote-mail-ballot-bergen-english.pdf](http://www.nj.gov/state/elections/form_pdf/vote-by-mail-forms/vote-mail-ballot-bergen-english.pdf), for a downloadable pdf and instructions on completing and mailing the Vote by Mail ballots. All “vote by mail” ballots have to be received by the County Board of Election before the polls close at 8 p.m. October 2nd.

**Q27 I still have additional questions. Where can I get answers?**

**A27** Everyone is welcome to attend the “Public Referendum” information sessions set for: Wednesday, Sept. 12 at 7 p.m. at Villano School's Learning Lab Monday, Sept. 17 at 6 p.m. in the Emerson Jr./Sr. High School Media Center, Wednesday, Sept. 26 at 7 p.m. in Memorial School's Multipurpose Room/Gym. Community members with additional questions can email them to [referendum@emersonschools.org](mailto:referendum@emersonschools.org), and they'll be routed to the appropriate person to provide the most up-to-date, accurate information.