

Clarkston School District
Focus Group Summary: Clarkston High School Bond
Fall 2023

This summary is presented following data collected, and through a facilitation lens, of two focus group sessions held on 7/26/2023 and 8/21/2023. These sessions used semi-structured and timed activities, essential for capturing everyone's input.

Purpose: For the Clarkston School District Board to receive input from community members using a formal, inclusive process.

Questions asked included:

- 1) What aspects were you pleased with about the bond initiative?
- 2) What aspects were you not pleased with about the bond initiative?
- 3) A big idea I see for funding a new high school is.
- 4) What keeps you or others from supporting a bond initiative in our community?

Summary of Question 1

1. Communications & Information Dissemination:

One of the most acknowledged aspects was the bond initiative's efforts in terms of communication and information dissemination. The community appreciated a diverse range of resources, from online platforms, videos, and other web resources to traditional methods of outreach. Visible signage and open discussions with staff and some community members were also highlighted, reflecting a generally well-received communication strategy. The flow and honesty in presenting the financial details of the initiative were particularly noted.

2. Community Engagement & Involvement:

The bond initiative was praised for its emphasis on community engagement. It was recognized for being community-led and bolstered by various events like community and information fairs. The strategy to mobilize the community for voting and the active involvement of community businesses further underscored the initiative's inclusion approach.

3. Clarity & Transparency:

Clarity and transparency stood out as significant positive attributes of the initiative. The detailed explanation about the bond's cost, the clarity and plans, and a distinct emphasis on career and workforce technology education were seen as beneficial and transparent elements of the proposal.

While there were concerns about the bond initiative, its strengths lay in robust communication, community engagement, clarity, forward-thinking efficiency, and relevance to the educational landscape's modern demands. These positive aspects provide a foundation on which to build further community support and trust.

Summary of Question 2

1. Cost & Expense Concerns:

The foremost concern raised revolves around financial considerations. Many in the community feel the expense related to the bond initiative is overly burdensome and unrealistic. This sentiment is reflected in repeated mentions of costs being too high, the potential strain on property owners and renters, the tax burden, and the perceived unsustainability of the cost proposed.

2. Communication & Community Engagement Issues:

A significant portion of the community feels there was inadequate engagement regarding the bond initiative. This includes concerns about insufficient input on design decisions, perceived deception or misinformation, a failure to connect with different community segments (including unregistered voters), and a perceived lack of diverse communication methods. A sentiment of exclusion and lack of trust underpins many of these concerns.

3. Timing & Repeated Attempts:

There's frustration regarding the frequency and timing of the bond proposal. Those in attendance felt it has been presented multiple times despite previous rejections. Concerns also arise about the bond's alignment with broader economic conditions, suggesting a desire for more strategic timing and patience in reintroducing initiatives.

4. Planning & Design Concerns:

Doubts exist regarding the planning and design aspects of the proposed bond initiative. These range from concerns about the selected location or footprint of the facility, the perceived neglect of current facility conditions, issues with phasing in the design, capacity planning misalignments, and a preference for repair over rebuilding.

5. Prioritization & Focus Concerns:

The community suggests a misalignment in prioritization. There's a call to refocus efforts, such as addressing student's academic and social proficiency before investing in athletics or extravagant designs. This highlights a perceived disconnect between the initiative's goals and the community's values or priorities.

While the bond initiative's intent is understood, significant reservations are related to costs, communication strategies, timing, planning, and priority alignment. Addressing these concerns and bridging the perceived gaps will be essential to gaining broader community support.

Summary of Question 3

1. Cost Management & Budgeting:

There's a strong emphasis on fiscal prudence and responsible budgeting. Community suggestions center on tailoring the project to align with what the community can realistically afford. Ideas include simplifying designs to achieve cost savings, awaiting favorable financial conditions such as better interest rates and lower inflation, and considering phased approaches to the project. The need to scale back expenses and reduce levies also emerged as crucial strategies.

2. Grants & Non-Profit Donations:

Leveraging external funding sources, notably through grants, appears to be a popular recommendation. The community suggests seeking non-tax-based funding from state and capital campaigns, employing dedicated grant writers, and actively pursuing contributions from non-profit entities. This highlights the importance of seeking external financial support to reduce the burden on the local community.

3. Community & Student Involvement:

There's a robust call to involve the broader community, especially the younger generation, in the funding process. Suggestions range from hosting bake sales and car washes to deploying student and adult craftsmanship in specific projects related to construction. The idea of including other schools in the region further demonstrates a desire for a collective approach to the initiative.

4. Legislative & State Support:

Engaging with legislative bodies at the state level emerges as a key recommendation. Ideas span from appealing for redistribution of lottery funds to lobbying for sales tax reductions or allocations. Petitioning the state to recognize and provide special allowances for areas with small

tax bases further underscores the need for a tailored approach to funding based on the community's unique profile.

5. Alternative Funding Strategies & Partnerships:

The community recognizes the value of innovative financial strategies and collaborations. Ideas range from seeking business investments and examining how other districts fund their facilities to breaking the project into management chunks and even considering geographic boundary adjustments, like including Asotin.

In essence, while the community recognizes the need for a new high school, the emphasis is on strategic financial management, leveraging external funding, maximizing community involvement, engaging with legislative bodies, and seeking innovative partnerships. Addressing these themes may be key to making the initiative financially viable and garnering widespread support.

Summary of Question 4

1. Financial Concerns:

The primary reservation expressed by the community revolves around the cost. The prevalent sentiment suggests that the expense is disproportionate for the community's size and its student demographics. Concerns about the excessive tax burden, annual levy increases, and the broader impact of these high costs on the small businesses in the area were repeatedly highlighted.

2. Facility Planning and Maintenance:

Many in the community feel that the proposed design for the facility is more elaborate than necessary and does not align with the community's identity. This sentiment is further intensified by prevailing perceptions of the insufficiency of the current facility. The past lack of maintenance in existing structures raises doubts about the commitment to maintaining new ones, leading to trust issues.

3. Community Engagement and Information:

There's a palpable sentiment that there hasn't been enough community engagement, especially across all community sectors. Additionally, there's a perceived lack of transparency and clarity about the cost breakdown, the school's educational focus, and the exact purpose of the taxes related to the bond.

4. Educational Outcomes:

There's a call to shift focus from infrastructure to actual educational results. Concerns arise from observations that while there is significant investment in infrastructure, there seems to be no parallel emphasis on improving core educational outcomes, such as proficiency in reading, writing, math, science, and English.

5. Alternate Proposals:

Members of the community proposed exploring alternative avenues, like strengthening partnerships with colleges and vocational training institutes and seeking local bids for projects to keep the money in the area. Concerns about existing commitments like the yet-to-be-paid-off Aquatic Center and the ambiguity of the school's focus – whether academic or technical – were also brought up.

While the intention of the bond initiative is acknowledged, the community has voiced significant concerns about its financial implications, planning approach, lack of engagement, educational outcomes, and alternatives. Addressing these concerns may be pivotal in gaining broader community support.