

# Future of elementary education in TCSD to be decided at ballot box on Tuesday

By David J. Hill  
SUN CORRESPONDENT

On Tuesday, Tonawanda City School District residents will vote on a capital project that will dramatically change the future of how elementary education is delivered.

If it passes. Some district leaders and members of the committee that researched and recommended the project a decade ago are concerned that misleading information may lead to the project receiving a failing grade.

Currently, Tonawanda has three elementary school buildings: Fletcher, Mullen and Riverview. The TONA2020 plan that the School Board approved in August proposes closing Mullen and Riverview and creating one pre-K through fifth grade elementary school complex at a renovated Fletcher School.

The two vacated buildings would likely be sold, a process that requires a separate district vote.

TCSD officials held three information sessions last month to give residents an opportunity to learn more about the project. Still, in recent weeks, some city residents have turned to social media to spread what project advocates say is misleading information about the plan.

A lot of it centers on a misunderstanding over the fact that school taxes are separate from those levied by the city, according to Dennis Smilinich, one of the original TONA2020 committee members.

Many city residents haven't been happy with the steep tax increases city leaders have approved over the past few years. The school district's budgets, however, have routinely been under the state-mandated tax cap.

"One of the biggest problems is that the city, not the school district, has been tough on taxpayers the past five years," Smilinich said. "A lot of people are misinterpreting that. I see Facebook and people are misconstruing it."

There's also been confusion over two key figures. The estimated cost of the project is \$53 million, the majority of which will be covered through state building aid.

That cost includes not only building upgrades, but also improvements to the elementary school curriculum that would be delivered in Tonawanda.

The current curriculum is limited in some ways because of the age of the school buildings, Superintendent Timothy Oldenburg said. "Some of our buildings weren't constructed to accommodate today's technology, whether it's door security or WiFi. It's a challenge in some of these older buildings because they were never designed for that," he said.

District officials have said it would cost approximately \$70 million to update the elementary curriculum within each building, as well as make much-needed repairs to boilers, roofs and security measures, among other fixes.

Residents have also questioned whether the single elementary campus could accommodate an influx of pupils. TCSD officials have said none of the projections they've been provided show signs of a population boom coming.

Tonawanda's three elementary buildings can house 1,026 students. The new Fletcher site, however, would be built for a maximum of 1,298 pupils, Oldenburg said, adding that there's room to grow.

"Should we need to expand decades from now, we'll still have the ability to do so with this plan," he said. "The last thing we want is to build a school that turns out in a short period of time to be too small."

The plan itself was researched and created by the TONA2020 committee, which comprised School Board members, parents, residents who no longer had children in the district, and staff members, among others.

It was an outgrowth of the committee created to determine how best to redistribute the pupils displaced in the wake of the closing of Highland Elementary, said Brian Mysliwy, another longtime committee member.

"When Highland closed, we realized things were changing around us and we as a community needed to thoughtfully and carefully consider the best way to move

forward," Mysliwy said.

The TONA2020 committee worked with a neutral third party to review data from the city, neighboring districts and across the country.

Ultimately, the group devised five different configurations for elementary education and rated them against several key factors, including programming and instruction, student performance, cost and community involvement.

"In every one of those categories, the single campus absolutely rose to the top," Mysliwy said.

He said he'd be pleased if the project passes, but it would be bittersweet. "My only disappointment is that by the time the single campus is built, my three children will be out of the district."

Voting takes place from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Oct. 22 in the High School Wellness Gym, 600 Fletcher St.



**BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT**

**WNY Auto Sales & Service**

BUSINESS HOURS: Mon.-Fri. 9am-6pm  
Sat. 9am-5pm • Sunday by Appointment

Service All Makes and Models  
Brakes • Tires • Batteries • Oil Changes  
Suspension • Exhaust • Undercoating  
All General Repairs

★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
**CARFAX**  
ADVANTAGE DEALER

All retail vehicles come with a Clean Carfax Report.  
12 Month / 15,000 Mile Warranty Included!

3875 Delaware Avenue, Tonawanda, NY 14217  
**716-551-1972**  
**WNYAUTOSALES.COM**

**The Old Chapel Antique & Artisan Market**

OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK  
10AM-6PM

Located in the former Ascension Church

MORE THAN 130 VENDORS

ORANGE BRICK CAFÉ • NOW OPEN •

\*Antiques  
\*Handmade Goods  
\*Gifts & Decor

**172 Robinson Street  
North Tonawanda  
716-545-6102**

\*Breakfast & Lunch  
\*Apple Cider Slushies  
\*Cheesecake

www.TheOldChapelMarket.com

VISIT OUR NEW STORE ONLY ONE MILE AWAY...

**The Old Greenhouse Antiques & Decor**

(716) 545-6102

OPEN 7 DAYS 10AM TO 6PM  
(formerly Hocks Flower Shop)

700 EAST ROBINSON STREET • NORTH TONAWANDA