

DJ Editorial
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Gearl Loden, Ph.D.

When I arrived three years ago in the Tupelo Public Schools, I quickly realized how much our community values accountability, transparency and excellence. Our focus to provide the highest quality instruction has been a top priority these last three years. Now, the buildings in which learning takes place need our attention.

If you've visited our schools recently, you've probably noticed that some of our facilities are aging. Our past administrators, Boards of Trustees, maintenance and operations staff have done an outstanding job of keeping them in good shape, but buildings constructed in the 1960's and much earlier, naturally demand attention and continuous maintenance. This past school year, we began to take a closer look at what our comprehensive facility needs were to serve our students and teachers for the next 15-20 years. We learned a lot.

Thanks to the input from principals, teachers, parents, architects and engineers, we now have a blue print that can put us on the right path for our future. We have some very exciting items on this long-range facilities plan - an expansion of our Early Childhood Education Center, additional classrooms at the Tupelo Middle School, major renovations to Milam's Fine Arts wing, cutting edge technology upgrades, and safety as well as energy-efficient features, including LED lighting across our district.

And then there are those items that are frankly, not so flashy, but critically needed. Things like new roofing- \$8 million worth - over the next few years. Some of our buildings desperately need cosmetic renovations, such as painting, flooring and windows. Plus, one-third of our buses are over 15 years old. Purchasing each new bus costs \$96,000. Many of our students are using laptops that are 5 years old. While Tupelo High School is still coined the "new high school", its air conditioning and heating units have not been replaced since the school was built 23 years ago.

Being good stewards of maintaining our resources while our students and teachers excel is taken very seriously. These projects have been carefully reviewed and tweaked by many stakeholders. Our plan also calls for sequencing these projects over 4-5 years.

The bottom line is our needs are real. These projects require planning financially as well. Here's what our district expenses are: 86% is spent on instruction; 5% is spent on building administration; 4% is spent on district administration and 5% is spent on operations. Over half of our annual revenue comes from our taxpayers and federal monies. The remainder comes from the state. State funding has been increasingly unpredictable. For example, salaries for TPSD teachers are \$36 million yet the state provides us \$29 million. Districts are then left to make up this difference and any much-needed pay raises for our teachers and assistant teachers.

States that embrace education are the states that flourish economically. Regardless of what evolves from this legislative session, we know that here in Tupelo, we have a history of relying on ourselves to move forward.

As you know, our district has been underfunded by the state by over \$25 million the last six years. That underfunding makes long-range projects like this very challenging to implement. We remain committed to doing what's right for our students – our future.

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