

Local Chamber issues report supporting sales tax initiative for school facilities

After nearly a year of research, meetings and community discussions, the Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce has issued a report supporting a half-cent sales tax initiative to fund facilities improvements in local schools.

In the fall of 2016, the Chamber put together a 10-member steering committee of local citizens to review Alachua County's infrastructure needs and make recommendations on how to meet those needs. The Putting Children First Infrastructure Investment Initiative, commonly referred to as i3, was chaired by businessman Brian Scarborough.



“While we discovered the need is great in many areas, our research and public feedback told us fixing our schools is the most immediate priority,” said Scarborough.

Scarborough, Chamber Board Chair Rory Causseaux, Chamber CEO Susan Davenport and other representatives of the Chamber presented the i3 Committee's findings following a tour of Idylwild Elementary School. Idylwild, like many other schools in Alachua County is both overcrowded and old. Among other issues, classroom buildings flood regularly, air conditioning fails constantly, the cafeteria is far too small for the population and there are 20 portables on the campus.

“Our teachers and staff keep a positive attitude and work hard to provide our students with a quality education, but there's no doubt that the physical environment just isn't what it should be,” said principal Wanza Wakely.

State funding for school facilities has dropped dramatically in the last 10 to 15 years. Facilities funding also took a major hit back in 2008 when the Florida Legislature lowered the cap on local property tax rates for school facilities by 25%. In the last ten years, Alachua County Public Schools has lost nearly \$170 million in revenue that would have gone to repairing, renovating and expanding local schools.

The district's average school building is 34 years old, but that number increases to 41 years when weighted by square footage. Most elementary schools are at or above 100% capacity. More than 6000 students attend at least part of their day in one of 300+ portables. A majority of the district's AC units and roofs are past their useful life span. And many classrooms, science labs, cafeterias, media centers and other core facilities are in serious need of renovation, replacement and/or expansion.

To meet those needs, voters will be asked to approve a half-cent sales tax initiative which will be placed on the November 2018 general election ballot. If approved, it would raise about \$20 million per year, with about a third of that amount paid by visitors to Alachua County. It's expected to cost the average Alachua County household about \$58 a year. An independent citizen's oversight committee would review all expenditures from the half-cent revenues.

“Like school districts across the state, we have been asked to do more with less,” said Superintendent Karen Clarke. “With the drastic cuts in facilities funding since the recession, we have been forced to make difficult decisions and delay what should be routine maintenance. Now we have the opportunity, with our community's help, to give our students the efficient, comfortable and up-to-date classrooms they deserve.”

“Our children are our community's greatest asset,” said Causseaux, who is also CEO at CHW Professional Consultants. “We must provide them with the best possible education and training. Our future quite literally depends on it.”

A copy of the i3 Committee's report can be found at gainesvillechamber.com.