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## Building for the future: Weld County school districts using big bonds to renovate and add facilities

Proliferation of capital projects aim to stay ahead of growth, update buildings



Contractors on a new 50,000-square foot addition at S. Christa McAuliffe S.T.E.M. Academy Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021 in Greeley. The addition and renovation was financed by a bond issue passed by voters in 2019. (Alex McIntyre/Staff Photographer)

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There is a trend happening in Weld County schools now: major construction.

With the population growth in the county and in northern Colorado comes the need for districts to upgrade existing school facilities or to invest in new buildings, and both are in progress in multiple local districts.

Eight different Weld districts have passed voter-approved, multi-million-dollar bond measures to fund capital or significant building projects since 2016. Over the same five-year span, eight school systems won property tax increases on a mill levy override, or MLO, which is the other main source of revenue for high-level expenses. The MLO pays for in-classroom needs such as personnel and curriculum.

In 2019, Greeley-Evans School District 6, the county's biggest and most diverse district, passed its first significant bond in nearly two decades — a \$395 million measure outlined to touch every school in the district including charter schools.





Contractors work on a 50,000-square foot addition at S. Christa McAuliffe S.T.E.M. Academy Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021 in Greeley. The large addition and renovation at the school was financed by a \$395 million bond issue passed by Greeley-Evans School District 6 voters in 2019. (Alex McIntyre/Staff Photographer)

There are common factors behind the run of bond projects over the last five years in county schools, such as population growth, according to one Colorado school finance expert. But, school districts ultimately decide their own paths and know when it's best to ask their voters to commit to large-scale funding projects. A simple reason often dictates the decision: need.

"For Greeley, it was time," said Greeley-Evans School District 6 Assistant Superintendent of Support Services Kent Henson. "It was way past due. Greeley has grown. For us, it was the right time, and the community saw the need."

In Colorado, the structure of school funding puts the lion's share of responsibility at the feet of districts. The state routinely ranks in the bottom third nationwide of per-pupil spending, leaving it up to local districts to go for bonds and mill levy overrides.

Tracie Rainey, executive director of the Colorado School Finance Project, a Denver-based nonprofit that compiles and distributes research-based, non-partisan information and data on topics related to school finance, said, "for whatever reason the state has not seen it has an obligation to K-12 facilities."

Platte Valley RE-7 School District Superintendent Glenn McClain said while there might be more interest in Denver now in better investment in K-12 education statewide, a complete about-face is slow coming.

"The expectation is that we want you to produce students who are employable and have skills, workforce skills and college-readiness skills, but we want to fund it on a 1990s level," McClain said.

The state education department oversees and administers a variety programs to help public schools with capital construction. One of those, known as a BEST (Building Excellent Schools Today), is a competitive matching grant to address safety hazards, health concerns and security, as well as projects designed to incorporate technology into education, according to the Colorado Department of Education website.

Weld RE-5J, Eaton and Weld RE-3J school districts received BEST funds in their recent bond victories.

Rainey said the timing of the all of the current school-improvement projects in the county has a lot to do with logistics.

"Once you go for a project, you're structuring that over three to five years," she added. "And especially on big ones, if you're building new schools or making multiple changes, you only have so much capacity in the system. You're moving kids around and you have to spread it around."

Rainey said among the other reasons for the local surge in bond projects in Weld County are:



- Changes in legislation on access to buildings and safety in the wake of school shootings including Columbine. In fact, this work is included in the current measures in nearly every school in the county.
- The average age of buildings in Colorado are 55 years old. “When you think of what’s needed for technology and classroom delivery, it is completely different,” Rainey said. “The age of the buildings and now trying to make sure you have classrooms structured in a manner to meet the needs of the population of students you’re serving. Trying to have an inclusive model and you have to have a different space and layout that looks different from the 1950s or 60s.”
- With the onset of COVID-19, districts are seeing the need to upgrade heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems while also addressing the need for smaller groups of students in buildings with hybrid models in place.
- According to the Colorado Department of Local Affairs, the population in Larimer and Weld Counties is projected to increase by 80% from 2015 to 2045, exceeding the statewide population jump of 53%.

While Weld RE-4 School District ended up not pursuing a bond measure in 2020, citing the COVID-19 pandemic, Weld RE-5J School District for students in Milliken and Johnstown went forward and passed a \$149 million measure. The bond was the first for the district in 18 years.

A water tower looms over an 820-acre parcel of vacant land under contract between Weld County Road 17 and Colo. Highway 257 south of U.S. Highway 34 on Feb. 25, 2021 near Greeley. The land, which will likely see development in the coming years, falls within the Weld RE-5J School District. The potential of this future growth was one factor in the district’s pursuit and passing of a bond issue in the November 2020 election to finance new and remodeled schools. (Alex McIntyre/Staff Photographer)

Weld RE-4, for students in Windsor and Severance, and one of the districts to earn a bond and MLO in 2016, is beginning to formulate plans for a new bond later this year. District chief operating officer Jason Seybert said a bond initiative likely will be key to the district’s future educational mission.

“In the past year our community has continued to grow, and enrollment increased even as many other districts saw a decline,” Seybert said in an email. “Our projections are that elementary and middle school enrollment will continue to push our schools even further beyond capacity this coming fall.”

Weld RE-5J Superintendent Leslie Arnold said in Oct. 2020 the district opted for a bond and MLO for the second-straight year, despite the pandemic, because of the long-term impact of the needs. Arnold said she’s worked with demographers on population trends and data shows the Johnstown area is a target area for future growth.



A conceptual rendering of the main entry way to a new Roosevelt High School. The Weld RE-5J School District is seeking an approximately \$150 million bond from voters in the November election to build a new Roosevelt High School in addition to replacing Letford Elementary School, converting the current Roosevelt High into a middle school and funding improvements at other schools in the district. (Rendering provided by Weld RE-5J School District).

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The bond will allow for replacing a 63-year-old elementary school, the construction of a new Roosevelt High School, the conversion of the current high school building into a middle schools, and improvements to multiple other schools.

Arnold said the new Roosevelt High School will have capacity for 1,500-1,600 students and it will “probably open close to capacity.” The high school is scheduled for completion in 2023.

Arnold said the plethora of bond projects in county schools now offers her a couple of clues as to the reasons.

“One, we all have aging buildings and the legislature is not putting enough into yearly funding for any kind of construction,” Arnold said, adding Weld RE-5J brings in enough funds for certain maintenance but not to build a high school or replace a HVAC system (heating, ventilation and air conditioning).

Arnold praised Weld RE-4’s management of its growth and facility needs by going out for a bond every few years as the population grows. Before the 2016 bond that led to the construction of Severance High School, Weld RE-4 previously requested a \$41.5 million bond in 2007 to build Severance Middle School, Range View Elementary, an addition to Grandview Elementary and to improve other facilities, according to the district website.

A Windsor-Severance Re-4 School District sign thanks voters for approving the district’s 2016 bond initiative that is helping construct Severance High School.

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“They had a better system to go in front of voters,” Arnold said. “We had to retrain our voters because they’re not used to seeing this.”

Weld RE-5J bond and MLO proposals failed by narrow margins in 2019.

“In an off-year election, it’s tricky and especially when people aren’t used to seeing it,” Arnold added.

In Fort Lupton, Weld RE-8 School District Superintendent Alan Kaylor might use a different phrase to describe the process he and his colleagues go through while assembling and selling massive capital improvement projects to voters: a heavy lift.



Kaylor, who is in his fifth year as the superintendent, said the onus on local districts and communities to fund high-price measures creates challenges for students, families and administrators. In a district with a higher level of poverty, such as RE-8, where 71% of students receive free and reduced lunch benefits, it can be tough to raise money for a MLO or a bond.

Kaylor said education should be about students, who need the right learning environment to thrive. In order secure resources, superintendents have to put on different "hats," outside of a typical job description when it comes time for a bond or MLO.

"We have to go out and raise the money to open our schools," he said. "We have to garner interest and get it passed on the ballot. It certainly takes on a new meaning for a superintendent. Running a school district as, I don't want to call us CEOs, but we have to do the right thing for our kids."

## Eight Weld County School Districts passed bond measures dating to 2016:

- **2020 – Weld RE-5J**, \$149 million to replace Letford Elementary on land given to district by Town of Johnstown by providing money to receive an award of a \$9.5 million BEST grant; constructing a new Roosevelt High School; converting existing Roosevelt High School into a middle school; improvements to Milliken Elementary and Pioneer Ridge Elementary schools; addressing repairs and improvements to Early Learning Center and Knowledge Quest Academy facility.
- **2019 – Greeley-Evans School District**, \$395 million to build new Greeley West High School to increase capacity; replace Madison Elementary School and either rebuilding as an elementary or K-8; construction of a new K-8 school; 50,000-square foot addition to McAuliffe S.T.E.M. Academy K-8 to address overcrowding; 35,000-square foot addition to Chappelow Arts Magnet K-8 to address overcrowding; enhancements to safety and security, including securing entrances at all schools and replacing door hardware and locks; accessibility improvements in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); roof repairs and replacements at some sites; heating, ventilation and cooling upgrades; funds for every school for instructional and career preparation upgrades; funds to charter schools for repairs, renovations, safety and security and instructional upgrades.
- **Eaton School District, \$128 million** for upgrading safety and security and addressing deferred maintenance at all schools (except Eaton Elementary, which will be decommissioned), with a portion of the cost to be paid by a grant from the state's BEST program; constructing a new high school; remodeling existing Eaton High School to convert it to middle school; remodeling existing Eaton Middle School to convert it to an elementary school; constructing a new transportation facility.
- **Platte Valley School District, \$26.5 million** for security upgrades, including new security cameras; extending the life of school facilities by replacing outdated roofs and HVAC units and addressing flooring, electrical, plumbing, constructing an auxiliary gym and wrestling room at the high school; replacing outdated technology infrastructure and equipment; improving school grounds, including playgrounds and fields; and replacing school buses and vehicles that have exceeded useful life.
- **2016 – Weld RE-4, \$104.8 million** to address capacity issues and facility improvements at Windsor High School; construct Severance High School; facility investments and improvements at elementary and middle schools.
- **Weld RE-1, \$62 million** for repairs and upgrades; additional classroom space at North Valley Middle School; and a new gym at Platteville Elementary.
- **Weld RE-3J, \$61 million** for district-wide safety and security enhancements; deferred maintenance projects and minor educational enhancements (for S.T.E.M., art and science); new facility to replace majority of aging elementary school in Hudson; new elementary school to accommodate growth in Lochbuie).
- **Weld RE-8, \$48.6 million** for new pre-K school, new early-childhood center on the main school campus off S. Fulton in Fort Lupton; plans for extensive renovations and updates at Fort Lupton High School (science, math and career pathway areas); renovating the fourth and fifth grade sections of the building at Butler Elementary School; upgrades throughout Twombly Elementary School and increasing library and cafeteria sections, and additional upgrades to existing buildings, safety improvements and program improvements.

## Weld County districts to pass mill levy override measure dating to 2016:



- **2020 – Weld RE-5J**, \$4 million additional for next 10 years to address: attracting and retaining quality teachers and staff; expansion of career and technical education programs; additional safety, security and mental health personnel; expansion of career and technical education programs at the middle and high schools; and replacement of school busses.
- **Weld RE-8**, \$1.4 million to protect existing funding to retain quality teachers, teachers aides, bus drivers, custodians and other support staff; upgrade instructional technology to ensure every student has equal access to remote learning when needed.
- **Weld RE-3J**, \$3.3 million an extension to attract and retain quality teachers and staff; expand career and technical education programs at the middle and high schools; provide additional safety, security and mental health personnel across the district; replace buses.
- **2019 – Eaton School District RE-2**, \$1.5 million to provide additional mental health and safety resources; continuing the district commitment to educational excellence by attracting and retaining high-quality teachers and support staff; and funding increased cost of operating and maintaining district buildings.
- **Platte Valley RE-7**, increase \$414,303 and continue \$2.4 million to recruit, train and retain quality teachers and support staff (bus drivers, food service employees, custodians, teachers' aides and secretaries); maintain class sizes that enhance student learning; maintain music, gifted and talented and related programs.
- **2018 – Weld RE-10J Briggsdale**, \$706,800 for recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers and staff for essential educational programs, providing curriculum and educational materials, expanding technology access to more students, providing preventative maintenance and upkeep to existing facilities and bus fleet.
- **2017 – Greeley-Evans School District 6**, \$14 million to recruit and retain high-quality teachers and support staff; improve safety and security by repairing critical structural problems, replacing old school buses and installing security cameras at middle and high schools; ensuring students have job training and are workforce ready by graduation; improving technology, digital content, curriculum materials and textbooks; equal share of funding will go to all charter schools on a per pupil basis.
- **2016 – Weld RE-4**, \$3.6 million for operating costs of new schools and technology to be phased in over 3-year period.
- **Weld RE-3J**, \$3.3 million to meet goals involving instructional initiatives, staff recruit and retain, technology and maintenance.

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