

Dr. Valerie Truesdale  
Superintendent, Beaufort County Schools  
322-2300

Submission for Op-Ed Page  
April 18, 2008  
Approx. 950 words

## **Charlie Wetmore's referendum questions answered**

The Bluffton Town Council last week endorsed the April 26 school bond referendum – but it wasn't unanimous. Councilman Charlie Wetmore, voting against the endorsement, said he wanted to see his five questions about the April 26 school bond referendum answered publicly.

School District facilities staffers have met with Mr. Wetmore on several occasions to discuss his concerns, but we are pleased to offer this information.

1. Mr. Wetmore said his constituents “express their displeasure surrounding the building of the North Area High School.” Response: This project, approved by county voters in 2000 and tied up in land zoning issues for years, broke ground last month. It will serve a group of students from a geographic area that has been disenfranchised from extracurricular activities and which has a disproportionate number of dropouts. The school will serve an opening enrollment of 450-650 students with the capacity to expand.

2. Mr. Wetmore asked why the School District re-hired “a contractor who has refunded hundreds of thousands (of dollars) related to the 2000 referendum to be involved in building the additions and the new middle school in Bluffton.” Response: The School District's process for hiring contractors is very detailed and involves School Board members as well as members of the citizens' Capital Improvements Advisory Committee. Even with low-bid situations, the School District is pre-qualifying all contractors. The contractor he is referring to wasn't involved in any refund situation.

3. “The School District has turned down or significantly delayed at least three projects in Bluffton alone that would be partially to fully-funded by other sources. Parents, developers and community members are aware of some or all of these offers and wonder why the District has not followed through,” Mr. Wetmore wrote. Specifically:

a. “Two tennis courts at Bluffton High that parents and a local foundation committed to fund (to the tune of \$80,000) over four years ago,” he said. Response: The tennis courts at Bluffton High are in the School District's capital plan – the \$80,000 is a generous contribution but isn't enough money to pay for the project. The School District is paying for the balance of this project through its 8 percent funds.

b. “Refurbishing of the M.C. Riley football stadium by PALS in return for right to 2nd refusal of use of the stadium (after the School District).” Response: While the football

stadium is valuable for some groups in the community, it plays an important role in the construction of the M.C. Riley early childhood center for kindergarten and pre-kindergarten students. The District has been good neighbors in sharing the M.C. Riley campus with the fire district, the Town, and the county's Parks & Leisure Services department (the pool); however, the stadium area appears to be the most efficient use of space and the most efficient use of the taxpayers' money for the early childhood center. The design currently in development will also alleviate some of the traffic issues experienced at the school.

c. "A local developer offered money toward building a new building at Bluffton High that would relocate the weight room, wrestling room and JROTC program. This would free up enough rooms in the main building to effectively increase the student capacity at the school by around 500 students according to a member of the District. The cost of this project? Less than \$200,000," Mr. Wetmore wrote.

Response: The proposed building would "free up" six classrooms at the most, increasing capacity by 120 students. The School District investigated this concept with one its architects. Based on recent projects of similar scope, the cost for the building described is \$500,000-\$700,000, well above Mr. Wetmore's estimate. In South Carolina, any building used by students must come under the requirements of the state's Office of School Facilities. This building, even though it's labeled a wrestling building, must comply with all these requirements. The building would require everything a classroom building would: HVAC, fire suppression systems, fire alarm, restrooms, etc. Further, a good amount of site work would be required prior to construction.

It is a relatively new practice for our school district to ask developers to set aside acreage for schools. The developer in Bluffton that Mr. Wetmore references wasn't in a position to provide land; however, the company has offered \$100,000 over four years to support environmental science education at Bluffton High. That contribution is greatly appreciated – but it still falls far short of what would be required to construct a wrestling facility. Most importantly, though, the company's contribution will directly impact student learning.

4) "Some of the items on this referendum are questionable as necessary expenses. The ones that are brought up most often are: the Beaufort High Performing Arts Center and the Battery Creek Wrestling Room," Mr. Wetmore wrote.

Response: The room is a multi-purpose physical education room for all students at Battery Creek High. It will provide a healthier, more sanitary and safer environment for students and staff by relocating the wrestling practice room out of the cafeteria. The Beaufort Cluster auditorium is needed because Beaufort High cannot fit its freshman class into the current lecture hall as it is half the size of the other high schools' auditoriums. Lady's Island Elementary is an arts-infused school. It and the area's four other elementary schools and two middle schools also will use this facility.

5) “Why are we building schools for four year olds (who the District is not charged with educating) when we are going to have serious issues with Bluffton High and other schools in the near future -- issues that aren't addressed in this bond referendum,” Mr. Wetmore wrote.

Response: The early childhood centers don't add grades. They simply address the overcrowding issues at Bluffton Elementary and M.C. Riley Elementary by relocating the kindergarten and pre-kindergarten students to a specialized environment and out of portable classrooms. If funds were available, the District would love to serve all at-risk four-year-olds. However, space isn't available in the Bluffton schools. We want to assure community leaders that the referendum addresses overcrowding in the Bluffton schools through construction of two new elementary schools, two kindergarten centers and buying land for another middle and high school.

We thank Councilman Wetmore for the opportunity to meet with him several times in recent weeks and for this opportunity to provide our answers again in public.