



# the Bulletin



November 2009

Ensuring opportunities for learning, personal growth & social responsibility

## SPECIAL REFERENDUM EDITION

*Energy savings, student safety & technology are themes*

### Voters to consider \$19.6 million in renovations on December 9

**O**n Wednesday, Dec. 9, Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake school district voters will go to the polls in the high school gym to consider a **Renovations Referendum** consisting of three separate propositions for a total of \$19.6 million.

This referendum includes 14 projects that the Board of Education has chosen — following a year of study and recommendations from two committees — as the district’s most urgent needs out of an initial list of nearly \$40 million in projects.

The largest portion of the

referendum (\$12.5 million) is for energy conservation projects that would reduce district heating bills. Other projects would improve student safety (\$3.9 million) and improve instruction through faster internet access (\$3.1 million).

#### Modest tax impact

If approved by the voters, the referendum of \$19.6 million is expected to cost the median district homeowner a property tax increase of only \$35 in 2012-2013 because:

- ▶ 75% of project costs will be paid by state building aid, &
- ▶ Energy savings will reduce the district’s operating costs



Portions of each school roof would be replaced. Many of these are in bad shape or starting to leak. This piece of the Middle School roof was last replaced in 1987.

by at least \$100,000 a year.

Details, photos and answers to frequently asked questions are all inside. ♦

#### Contents:

2 What’s included in the referendum?

3 - 7 Renovations FAQ

5 One resident’s thoughts on the 2009 referendum



6 - 7 Drawings of new traffic patterns for Stevens & Middle School

8 Emergency texting feature added to School News Notifier

### H1N1 response: Parents heeding call to keep sick kids at home

As this newsletter goes to press in mid November, the BH-BL schools have survived their first wave of H1N1 flu cases, and are guardedly waiting for the usual late fall outbreak of seasonal flu plus the potential second wave of H1N1 cases that health authori-

ties predict will come later this winter or spring. Our schools are also ready and willing to be used as vaccination clinic sites as soon as the Schenectady and Saratoga County Health Departments can get the vaccine.

Thanks to several communications that went home to parents starting the first week of school

and to extensive preparations by nurses and other staff, most folks seemed to be ready when the first wave of H1N1 flu and colds hit our community right after Columbus Day weekend.

On a typical day, 4 to 5 percent of the BH-BL student body will be absent from school



## What projects does the referendum include?

Note: Project figures given below are estimates prepared by our architectural firm. Actual costs will be determined by seeking bids from contractors, but in no case can the district exceed the overall dollar amount authorized by the voters for each proposition.

### 1: Energy Bond Issue Proposition for \$12,538,550

► **Roofing:** The oldest or most deteriorated portions of roofing at each school would be replaced for \$4.1 million. Since our schools have more than 11 acres of roof to maintain, at least some roofing work must be done every five years to prevent leaks and expensive emergency repairs. Previously we used 20-year roofing, but have switched to 30-year-warranted materials now that that more cost-effective option is available. (To view maps showing the ages and replacement plan for school roofs, go to [www.bhbl.org](http://www.bhbl.org) and click on the "Renovations Referendum 2009" icon.)

► Of all projects here, converting the 47-year-old steam **heating system & boilers at Stevens Elementary** to a much more efficient hot water system will cut our energy costs the most. The Stevens fire alarm system would be upgraded at the same time since both projects require opening up hallway ceilings. This combined project will cost \$3.9 million. A similar conversion from steam to hot water heat at the much larger High School in 2006 immediately began saving the district \$100,000 a year in heating costs.

► Replacing the remaining **single-pane windows** at three schools (High School, Middle School & Charlton Heights) will cost an estimated \$1.7 million.

► \$375,000 is earmarked to replace worn-out and deteriorated **exterior doors** at all five schools.

► Upgrading a Charlton Heights boiler plus the school-wide **heating control system** will cost \$1.5 million. Upgrading **heating control systems** at the Middle School and High School will cost \$675,000. These three schools already have (or will have in Charlton Heights' case) modern, efficient boilers. But they still rely on old-fashioned pneumatic temperature controls, so that rooms on the sunny side of the building may be sweltering while other rooms are uncomfortably cold. New HVAC digital controls will fur-

ther reduce heating costs and give us the ability to send heat only to the rooms that need it.

► The least expensive project here would add air conditioning to the **Pashley School cafeteria** for \$97,500. Pashley is our only two-story school without a large meeting room where children can go to cool down on extremely hot days.

### 2: Student Safety Bond Issue Proposition for \$3,973,000

► **Traffic patterns:** Redesigning and improving the traffic pattern at Stevens Elementary for \$1.3 million and the Middle School for \$1.7 million would not only improve the safety of children and drivers on school grounds, but also reduce the congestion and unsafe conditions that now occur on Lakehill Road, impacting the entire community. Currently cars and buses compete with one another when entering and exiting the schools, which often results in long lines and lengthy waits on Lakehill.

If the proposition is approved, each school would receive a new buses-only, one-way driveway, additional parking spots for cars, and safer ways for children to be dropped off or picked up. For details, please see the maps on pages 6 and 7.

► Fixing **field drainage problems** north of the **High School track** and re-sealing and re-lining the track's rubberized surface must be done before the track's underlying structure is damaged and the whole thing would have to be replaced. This project is estimated to cost \$273,000.

► Replacing the **movable partition walls** inside our school gyms for \$498,000 is another urgent project. These are old, in bad shape, and some of their motorized mechanisms are no longer reliable, nor are parts available. Teachers try to avoid opening or closing the walls for fear they will get stuck half way open.

► The **septic system pumping stations** at four schools are 50 years old and need to be replaced for \$100,000. Schools cannot operate without a healthy and reliable way to handle waste.

### 3: Technology Bond Issue Proposition for \$3,102,000

Improved internet access is needed to provide BH-BL students and teachers with greater bandwidth & access to Internet 2 educational opportunities. For instance, at any given moment during the school day, 300 - 400 computers in our High School alone may be competing to get through bottlenecks in our existing access system and bring learning materials to students.

Our schools all have computers capable of sending and receiving information at 1,000 megabytes per second (mbps), but are linked to the world through microwave transmission towers capable of only 45 mbps. The Technology Proposition includes two projects to end this bottleneck.

► Install, lease and maintain a **fiber optic network** for 20 years to link our schools to the internet for \$1,752,000.

► Upgrade existing **LAN (local area network) equipment** within all five schools to connect school computers to the fiber optics above for \$1,350,000.

Currently the slow speeds imposed by our existing LAN and microwave transmission towers prevent pupils from using and practicing the kind of interactive internet skills and activities that have already become commonplace in 21st century careers. In contrast, using the speed of fiber optic access, BH-BL pupils would be able to participate in real time collaborative learning projects with experts, colleges and other schools around the world. They could, for example, discuss global warming live with oceanographers in Seattle, talk to actors at the Globe Theater in London about a Shakespeare play they just read, or pose questions to their representative in Washington D.C. in real time.

It is also important to note that this proposition includes funding to lease and maintain the fiber optic system for 20 years, which makes the project eligible for 75% state building aid. Without this provision, BH-BL property taxpayers would have to shoulder 100% of project costs. ♦

## Why are these projects needed & why do they cost so much?

Your home gets constant wear and tear, both outdoors from the sun and snow and indoors from your daily activities. Multiply that hundreds of times and you'll have an idea of what happens to our schools, which serve 430 to 1,140 active youngsters plus staff daily.

After 20 years of repeated freezing and thawing, roofing starts to fail. After 40 or more years of constant use, boilers become unreliable and inefficient, windows don't work properly, and even structures built to be used by hundreds of children daily just plain wear out.

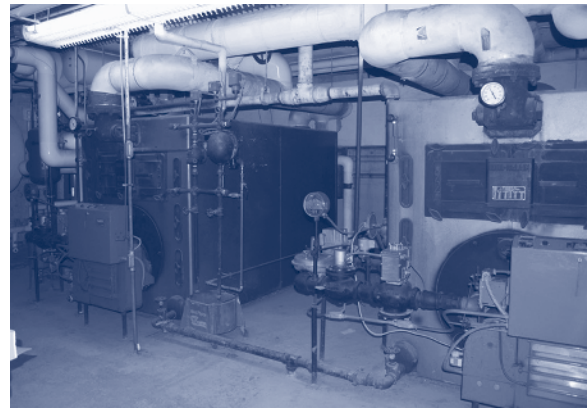
Every five years starting in 1983, BH-BL has created a five-year renovation plan to identify, fix, and pay for our most pressing infrastructure needs. Projects in the 2009 referendum were chosen as the best ways

for BH-BL to:

- ▶ Address critical areas of deterioration and maintain the community's investment in school facilities.
- ▶ Reduce annual energy costs.
- ▶ Improve safety, and
- ▶ Remove bottlenecks that now limit learning via the world wide web.

Three factors that drive up the cost of school renovations include extensive, stringent school building codes that are very different from what businesses must follow, the fact that most projects can only be done in the summer while school is not in session, and the state Wicks Law.

The BH-BL Board of Education



*The original front portion of Stevens Elementary is still being heated by steam boilers dating from 1962. Replacing these with a modern high-efficiency hot water heating system will save significant amounts of energy and money.*

has unsuccessfully lobbied against the Wicks Law for many years. It requires that schools work directly with multiple contractors (one for plumbing, one for heating, etc.) rather than the cheaper method of using a primary contractor and whatever subcontractors he or she may hire. This legal restriction is estimated to add anywhere from 10 to 20 percent to the cost of major projects compared to what a business might pay. ♦

## Why not wait & do these projects when the economy improves?

Actually, waiting to see what was happening with the economy was the approach that the Board of Education took LAST fall. Our most recent major renovations referendum was in 2003. So sticking with the five-year renovations cycles that have worked so well for BH-BL would have meant holding this referendum in the fall of 2008, when Wall Street was in free fall and our national economy was so uncertain.

Some would argue that our economy is not much better today, but in the meantime school infrastructure needs have only grown worse. The Board of Education takes it respon-

sibility to maintain the integrity and usefulness of school facilities very seriously. Simply waiting for ancient boilers or dilapidated roofs to fail is not an option.

Instead, in the past year the Board continued its discussions and analysis. A Critical Infrastructure Needs Committee researched the most urgent issues in our facilities and prepared a list of needs totaling \$39.5 million for the Board in March 2009.

A follow-up Renovations Review Committee of 21 residents and staff examined this list, toured facilities, and made recommendations to the

Board in June. They felt strongly that the Board should go ahead with a vote in 2009, and prioritized the original list of projects to focus on the most critical needs. As Board members continued to discuss and reduce the proposed referendum, they also learned that an October vote would not be possible because town voting machines can no longer be used either 30 days before or after a general election.

Ultimately Board members approved putting a Renovations Referendum totaling \$19.6 million before the voters on December 9. The referendum was broken into three separate propositions (energy, student safety & technology) for greater clarity and transparency. ♦

## How can \$19.6 million in school projects cause such a small tax increase?

While property taxes may continue to increase as the district's annual operating budget increases, issuing renovation bonds and spreading payments for them over a number of years means that only a fraction of the cost of these projects will contribute to the tax increase. Here's why.

The property tax impact of these propositions would be minimal because the district has been careful to include only projects that are eligible for state building aid in the referendum and because the energy-conserving projects in Proposition 1 will reduce the district's heating bills by more than \$100,000 annually.

Approximately 75 percent of the cost of all projects plus interest will be reimbursed to the district in the

form of state building aid. Under state regulations, this aid will be paid to the district in 15 equal annual payments starting in 2013. Therefore, to minimize the property tax impact, assistant superintendent Jacqueline St. Onge would structure district borrowing over 15 years as well.

If all three propositions are approved by the voters on December 9, the first time their cost would impact BH-BL property owners is in the 2012-2013 school year. The estimated tax impact for the owner of what is now a median value home (currently assessed at \$173,100) will be **less than \$35**.

Following 2013, the cost of referendum debt will remain the same for



Cracks in the surface of the high school track have been repaired several times, but the entire track now needs to be rescaled to prevent these from growing and damaging the underlying structure of the track.

15 years and then end. The \$35 figure is based upon the 2009-10 average true value tax rate in the district's four towns. ♦

## What about the Governor's efforts to cut aid to schools?

It is true that the Governor is pushing the state Legislature to cut aid that is already promised to school districts for the current school year, but that is OPERATING aid, not the BUILDING aid that our renovation

projects would be eligible to receive.

Building aid is a completely separate form of support that the state has long provided to encourage districts to keep their schools in good shape. The state Legislature tends to

change operating aid formulas each spring in the state budget (much to the dismay of Boards of Education who then have trouble doing any multi-year planning). But building aid formulas almost never change because the state knows that, as with mortgages, schools have structured long term debt around their 15-, 20- and 30-year building aid payment schedules with the state. ♦

## 75% of the referendum may be paid by the state, but doesn't that money come from my pocket as well?

Yes, it sure does. Most state revenue comes from the sales and income taxes paid by residents and businesses all across NY. *But these are taxes we will all be paying whether or not the BH-BL referendum is approved.*

The infrastructure needs here at BH-BL are just as real as the needs in New York City, Colonie, Binghamton, or anywhere else in the state. And BH-BL residents have just as much right to use state money to meet those needs — as long as the

money is being spent wisely. This is one reason why the Renovations Study Committee included so many residents: to assure voters that the value and necessity of all renovation projects had been carefully scrutinized by community members. ♦

## One resident's thoughts on the proposed referendum

*Dick Doyle, retired GE facilities manager and turbine engineer, has a unique perspective on the BH-BL renovations process. A member of the last four renovations committees, he helped prioritize projects and create the referenda in 1993, 1998, 2003 and 2009. Also, as a long-time member and current chair of the Town of Ballston Planning Board, he has insights into community needs, values and future developments.*

*He remembers being embarrassed by the shabby conditions in our schools in the early 1980s when he was running for a seat on the Board of Education. "Things were really bad before we started doing these five-year programs," he says. "I believe the continual investment into*

*school infrastructure is a necessity and our students feel the benefit of it." Other area school districts that have approved renovation plans in excess of \$90 million this decade are examples of what can happen if schools don't keep up with maintenance needs, he feels.*

*When asked about his favorite projects in the current referendum, he cites three that he has wanted to see done for some time: replacing the Stevens boilers and fixing traffic issues at Stevens and the Middle School. "I have been concerned about the Stevens traffic, about the cars and buses driving together there, for years, and we're finally going to have a correction," he says. Between these two traffic projects and the new crosswalks*

*that his Planning Board has convinced the state Department of Transportation to install at the intersection of Route 50 and Lakehill, "The community is going to see a major improvement on Lakehill Road."*

*He also feels that now is the time for BH-BL to move ahead with fiber optics, especially since the state will pay for so much of it. "One of the things I learned at GE is that we can't stand still, because the rest of the world moves. This is something that we certainly need and will need even more in the future."*



DICK DOYLE, BH-BL RESIDENT & FOUR-TIME RENOVATIONS COMMITTEE MEMBER



*Having only one driveway in front of Stevens Elementary causes multiple problems. Cars must wait for buses and buses wait for cars, which can back up traffic on Lakehill Road and tempt children to dart between vehicles.*

## Have we tried to fund some of these projects with grants?

Yes, we have, but so far we have not been able to convince any grant funders to say "yes" to our proposals.

In 2008, the NY DOT turned down our application for a \$173,000 "Safe Routes to School" grant that would have paid for some of the needed traffic improvements at the Middle School. In 2009 we were also turned down for a \$265,000 energy-conservation grant from NYSERDA

using federal stimulus dollars.

Part of the problem appears to be that our past efforts to make our schools more energy-efficient means that our needs are now not as dire as in some other districts. But our archi-

## What happens if projects turn out to cost more than estimated?

Under no circumstances can the district exceed the total dollar amount authorized by the voters. Unlike other governmental bodies that may be able to fund costs overruns, school districts must stay within the authorized amount. If projects turn out to cost more than expected, they must be eliminated or scaled back — for example, by replacing fewer single-pane windows or fewer square feet of old roofing.

In our past five-year plans, some project bids have come in higher than estimated and some have come in lower than estimated. For example, huge increases in the cost of steel and roof insulation after 2003 meant that some roofing work had to be scaled back. In the current depressed state of the market, the district is hoping that contractors may be hungry enough for work to give us lower bids than they would have a couple years ago.

The district's track record with regard to past referenda projects has been excellent. Although some individual projects in the 1983, 1988, 1993, 1998, and 2003 referenda had to be scaled back or postponed, all referenda were completed within allotted dollar amounts. ♦

tects have learned from this experience and are already working on a BH-BL proposal for the upcoming second round of NYSERDA grants. ♦

## Will these projects improve instruction?

Energy savings, safety, and critical infrastructure needs were the goals of projects in Propositions 1 and 2, not better instruction. On the other hand, it's certainly true that getting rid of the old fashioned, limited heating controls in four schools that now leave some classrooms sweltering while others can be very cold will both save money and provide an environment more conducive to learning.

The place where this referendum will have a pronounced impact of instruction is in Proposition 3. Bottlenecks in our schools' current internet access system cause computers to run very slowly and limit teachers' and students' ability to access 21st century collaborative learning materials and websites. ♦

## Why put these projects in a separate referendum instead of the annual budget?

Just as homeowners would not typically purchase a home or build a major addition using only one year's income, schools find it more efficient to plan and pay for large capital projects over a number of years.

Including projects this large in one year's operating budget would result in an unacceptably large tax increase. Another alternative of putting aside some money every year in a capital fund for major projects is a nice idea, but often not realistic given the intense and competing pressures that Board of Education members face each spring to cut taxes or use money on immediate things like smaller class sizes.

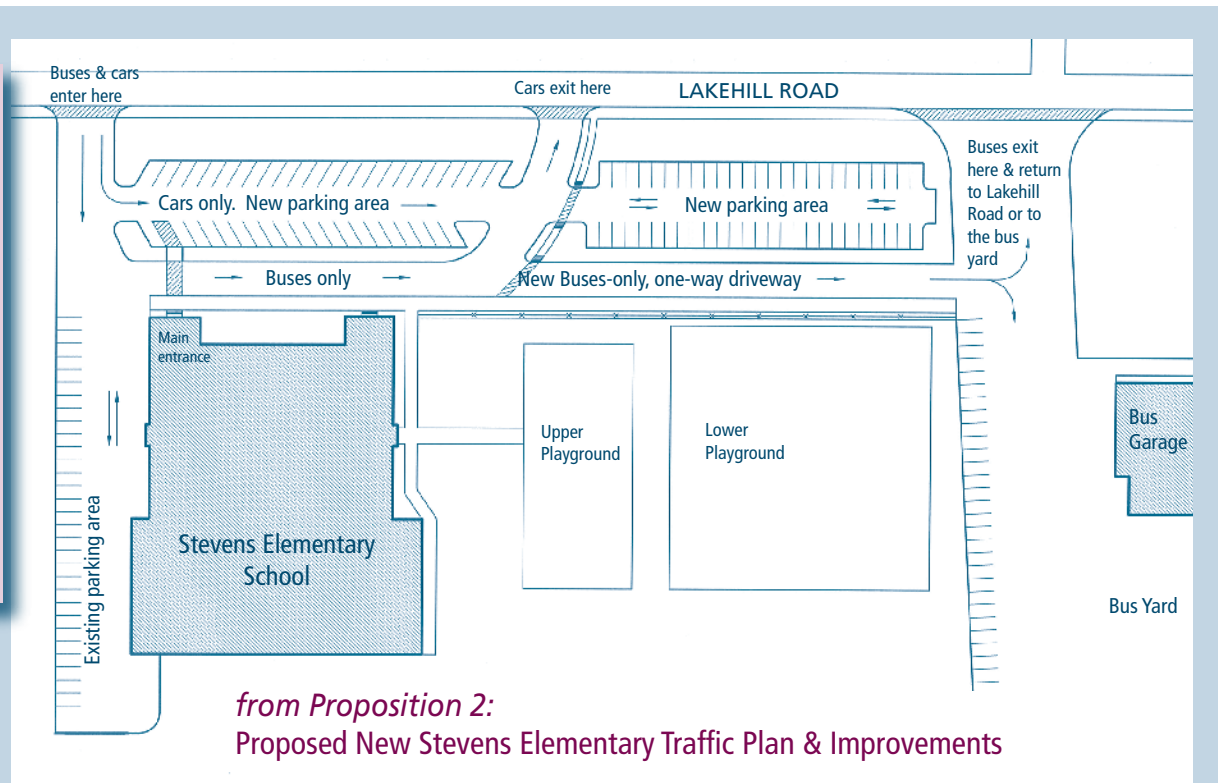
Instead, our district has a long history of replacing old paid-off debt with new debt. Monies that originally paid for school mortgages now pay for major infrastructure maintenance projects.

Another advantage is that bidding projects on a large scale often results in lower costs per unit. The price of an energy-conserving window is lower if you buy 200 than if you buy 40.

Our five-year renovation plans have also enabled the district to receive the maximum amount of state building aid to pay for three-quarters (or more in some past years) of project costs plus interest. ♦

Separate lanes for cars and buses will mean more safety for pupils and less congestion on Lakehill for drivers because cars and buses will no longer have to wait for one another to enter and exit.

Other safety features include: moving the playgrounds farther from the road and adding parking spots so parents will no longer need to park on the shoulders of Lakehill daily.



from Proposition 2:  
Proposed New Stevens Elementary Traffic Plan & Improvements

## What happens if the referendum is defeated? Would taxes go down?

If the referendum is defeated, taxes would not increase for additional debt payments because the Board of Education may not spend money to renovate its buildings without voter approval. But the Board is also responsible for maintaining district property. Therefore, if the three propositions in the referendum are defeated, the most urgent projects would have to be included in the annual operating budget — which would raise taxes or impact the dollars available for instruction.

Less critical projects would have to be delayed (even though some of them have been delayed for a number of years — witness the state of the Stevens boilers and our movable gym partition walls). But over time most of these projects would have to be addressed somehow or the deterioration of facilities would become more serious. Our experience is that doing projects on an emergency basis when systems fail is much more costly than planning ahead.

Board of Education members have put the Renovations Referendum up before the voters because they feel this is the most prudent and cost-effective way to protect the community's investment in its schools. ♦

## WHEN to WHERE to WHO can **Vote**

### Election Day:

The vote will be held on Wednesday, December 9, in the High School gymnasium at 88 Lakehill Road. The polls will be open from 7:00 AM to 9:00 PM.

### Voter Qualifications:

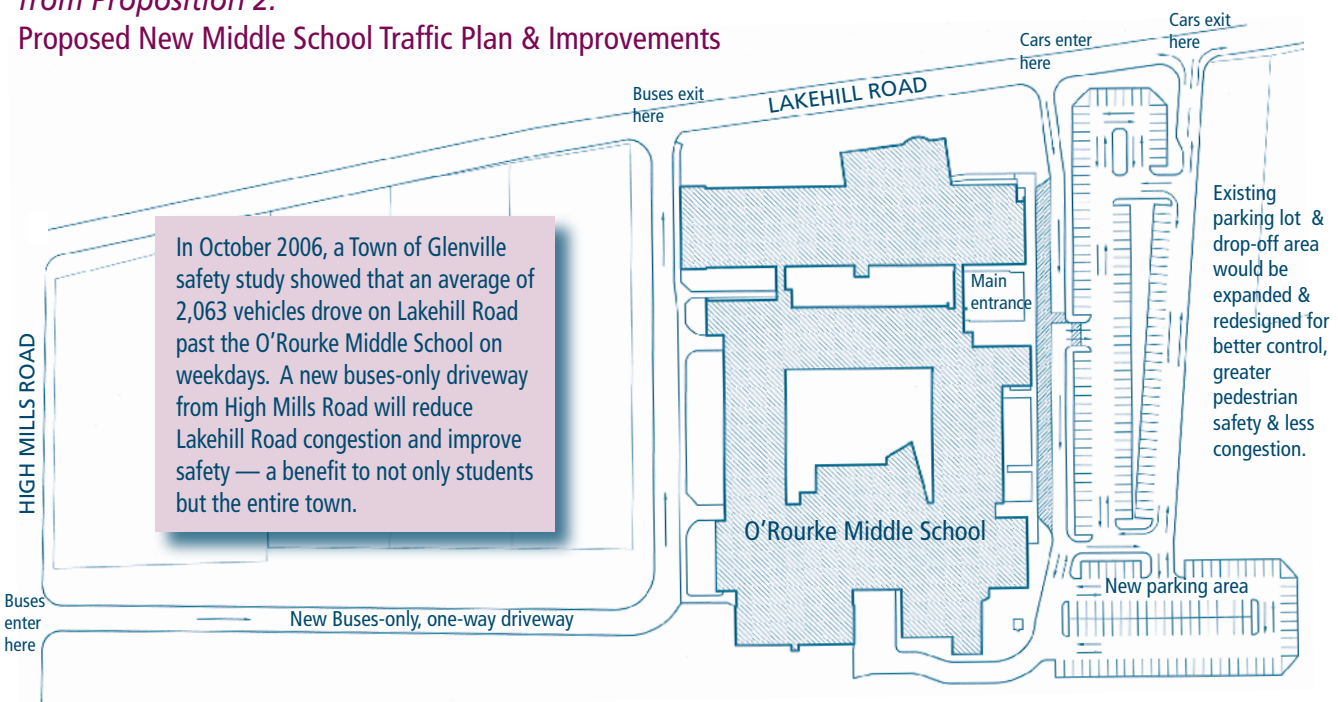
All voters must be U.S. citizens, age 18 or older on election day, residents of the BH-BL school district, and registered.

You are already eligible to vote on December 9 if you registered for or voted in either a school election or a general election anytime since December 2005. If not already registered, you may do so by coming to the district offices in the Hostetter Building, 50 Cypress Drive, Glenville, between 8:00 AM and 4:00 PM, Monday - Friday, through Dec. 4. Or you may register with your County Board of Elections by mail or in person.

### Absentee Voting:

Registered voters may vote by absentee ballot if they cannot appear at the polling place on December 9. To receive an absentee ballot, you must complete an absentee ballot application form, which is available either at the Hostetter Building or online at [www.bhbl.org](http://www.bhbl.org). Absentee ballots must be completed and returned to Clerk of the Board Jacqueline St. Onge no later than 5:00 pm on December 9 or they cannot be counted. Please call 399-9141, ext. 5025 or ext. 5017 if you have questions.

### from Proposition 2: Proposed New Middle School Traffic Plan & Improvements



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SPECIAL REFERENDUM EDITION

**H1N1 response**

Continued from ► page 1

for any reason, but in mid-October our overall absentee rate jumped to 11 percent for a couple days while two schools had as many of 20 percent of students absent. After a week or so, these numbers returned to normal.

One reason for these high numbers, our nurses feel, was that many parents were following the advice of health authorities and keeping their children home at the FIRST sign of illness. Many people turned out to have colds, while others were told by their doctors that they had the H1N1 flu.

A month later, our school nurses continue being extra vigilant about sending children home during the day when they come down with flu-like symptoms at school. "County health officials continue to tell me that this flu could be around for weeks or months to come, and the best way to prevent its spread is to stay home when you're sick," says superintendent Jim Schultz.

The district website ([www.bhbl.org](http://www.bhbl.org)) is parents' best resource on this topic. It includes information on flu symptoms, what to do if you get sick, and preventative measures being taken at school.

We will continue to update this all year as the flu situation unfolds. ♦

*Sign up now for emergency cell phone alerts*

**Features added to "School News Notifier"**

BH-BL parents and residents can now receive cell phone text messages when any of our schools has an unscheduled closure or delay due to bad weather or an emergency. Cell phone alerts are a feature that a number of working parents had requested since they are not always near a TV or internet connection when bad weather strikes.

In addition to the cell phone method for getting emergency alerts only, more "News" alerts were added to the district's online School News Notifier service (SNN) this fall. Anyone who is interested can now sign up to have news alerts sent to their email address regarding:

- Charlton Heights, Pashley, Stevens, Middle School or High School news,
- Budget development,
- Sex offenders living within the school district, and/or
- Emergency school closings and delays.

More than a thousand people have already signed up for SNN. To learn more or register for any SNN service, go to [www.bhbl.org](http://www.bhbl.org) and click on the large "SNN" logo on the right.

**Are you ready for winter weather?**

Four ways to find out when the BH-BL Schools are closed or delayed unexpectedly:

- Local TV stations (space limited)
- Cell phone SNN alert (limited to 100 characters)
- Email SNN alert
- District website: [www.bhbl.org](http://www.bhbl.org) The best resource, this may include more information because there is no space limit and we can update it as needed.

**Reminder to BH-BL residents:**

**Vote**

Be sure to **Vote on Wednesday, December 9**, on the Renovations Referendum. The polls will be open from 7:00 AM to 9:00 PM in the High School Gym. For all the referendum details, see inside or visit: [www.bhbl.org](http://www.bhbl.org)