

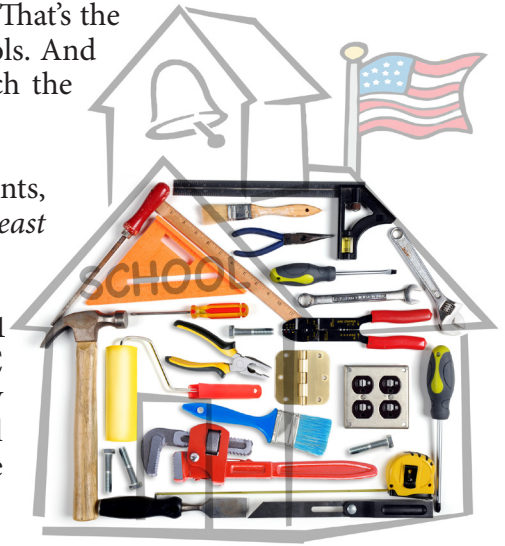
Focus on Facilities

Alachua County Public Schools

Imagine nearly 87 football fields put together, including the end zones! That's the amount of square footage maintained by Alachua County Public Schools. And that's just interior square footage--it doesn't include the land on which the district's schools and centers are located.

Now imagine about 27,000 students, 4,000 employees and a host of parents, volunteers, and other visitors using those facilities every weekday for *at least* ten months of every year. That's a lot of wear and tear!

Alachua County Public School buildings are, on average, more than 41 years old, and they need work! For example, a majority of our HVAC (heating, ventilation & air conditioning) systems are more than twenty years old, and most of our roofing is either at or past its expected useful life. And of course, the longer you wait to fix things the more expensive those fixes are likely to be.



The district is also seeing an influx of students after a few years of fairly flat enrollment. We've grown by more than 1,700 students in the past three years. Sixteen of our 20 elementary schools are at or above 95% capacity, and 12 of those 16 are at or above 100% capacity. We've got about 6,000 students in more than 300 relocatable (portable) classrooms throughout the district to help handle the overflow. With the economy and home sales picking up, our schools are only going to get more crowded.

And of course, to prepare our students for success in our modern and global economy, we've got to provide them with access to the technology, science labs, career-related facilities and other resources that are essential to that success.

Funding Cuts

Money to build, renovate, repair and maintain schools comes from two major sources—the state of Florida and local property taxes.

The state facilities funding comes primarily from what's called the Public Education Capital Outlay, or PECO fund. Unfortunately, there's not much PECO money for traditional public schools these days. In fact, between 2011 and 2014, Alachua County Public Schools got *no* PECO money—it all went to independently-operated charter schools.



For the past three years the state legislature has split PECO dollars between Florida's 650 charter schools and more than 3600 traditional public schools. (Here in Alachua County we have thirteen charter schools serving about 2,000 students, compared to 40 traditional schools serving about 27,000 students.) This year, our district expects to receive about \$830,000 in PECO facilities funding, which is a drop in the bucket compared to our needs.

With PECO funding so low, the money raised through local property taxes has been absolutely critical to school facilities funding. But even those revenues are way down.

For about 70 years, the state allowed local school boards to levy 2 mills to fund building, repair renovation and maintenance needs. (One mill equals one dollar in property taxes for every \$1000 in the taxable value of a property.) In fact, the phrase 'two mill' got to be the standard way of referring to local school facilities funding simply because it has been around so long.

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But back in 2008, state lawmakers decided to reduce the rate school boards could levy for facilities needs from 2 mills to 1.5 mills. With that one legislative decision, all Florida school districts lost a significant amount of revenue. Add the Great Recession and the big drop in property values, and the result was a major decrease in facilities funding for schools.

All told, Alachua County Public Schools has lost nearly \$169 million in state and local facilities funding in the last 10 years.

And by the way, it's important to understand that school boards don't have the flexibility to spend either PECO or 1.5 mills money the way they think is best for their own communities. There are many, many state rules and requirements we have to follow that limit our ability to meet our district's unique needs. For example, we must get the state's permission to build new schools or classroom buildings and raze existing buildings. There are limits on what we can spend to add capacity and even on our ability to replace old furniture! These are just a few of the hoops traditional public schools must jump through to provide for the needs of their students.



More Cuts

Schools are taking another big cut this year under legislation approved by the Florida Legislature and signed by Governor Rick Scott. That legislation requires districts to share local property tax revenues from the 1.5 mill with charter schools. It will cost Alachua County Public Schools more than \$650,000 a year, which is a big chunk of the less than \$10 million annual discretionary facilities funding currently available.

And remember, charter school facilities are privately-owned. That means there's limited accountability over how they spend their facilities funds. It also means that any public money spent on upgrades to charter facilities benefits the private owners, not the public—especially if the charter closes.

Local Initiative

To ensure we have high-quality learning environments in all our schools, the School Board of Alachua County is asking voters to approve a ½ cent sales tax initiative on the 2018 general election ballot. The ½ cent would raise about \$20 million per year, much of it from out-of-county visitors. All the revenue generated would stay in Alachua County, and it would create hundreds of jobs.

The ½ cent would not be charged on food, medicine or other exempted items. It's also limited to the first \$5000 of any large purchase, meaning the maximum additional tax on any single item, like a car, would be \$25. It would cost the average Alachua County household about \$58 a year.

Another advantage of a sales tax is that the state has less control over how the revenues are spent, meaning the School Board would have more flexibility to do what it feels is in the best interest of students, schools and the community. An independent citizens' oversight committee would also be established to review how the money is spent.

Over the next few months, the district will be developing an updated and comprehensive list of its facilities needs and recommendations for meeting those needs. Parents, students, teachers, business and civic leaders and other local citizens will be engaged in that process, because ultimately the quality of our schools and facilities is key to the success of our entire community.

