

SOUTH WHIDBEY RECORD

NEWS



School bond seeks to renovate schools

On April 25, South Whidbey voters will decide whether to approve an \$80 million school bond.

By [Kira Erickson](#) • April 14, 2023 1:30 am



South Whidbey Middle School Principal Kayla Phillips stands next to what will become the new entrance for grades 6-8 at the middle school/high school campus. (Photo by David Welton)

On April 25, South Whidbey voters will decide whether to approve an \$80 million bond that would update the two major school buildings in the South Whidbey School District.

School staff agree that making much-needed improvements at the middle school and high school campus will go a long way in maintaining students' safety and pride in the place where they learn, eat and play. While most of the projects covered by the bond pertain to this campus, where grades 6-12 will be located next school year, there's plenty to be done at the elementary school's north campus, where grades K-5 will be starting this fall.

The bond requires a supermajority of 60% "yes" votes to pass. It would be collected over a period of 20 years at a rate of 70 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value, which amounts to a monthly property tax increase of \$29.08 for someone with a home valued at \$500,000.

Long overdue updates include replacement of windows, siding and roofing; the addition of inclusive playground equipment, a covered walkway and a sheltered play area; upgrades to restrooms, locker rooms, courtyards and the track and field; reconfiguration and repavement of parking lots and structures to identify separate middle school and high school entrances.

South Whidbey Middle School and High School

Built in 1980 and last remodeled in the 1990s, the building that currently hosts grades 7-12 was originally constructed just for high school students. Declining enrollment over the years has provided space for the middle school students, who joined the high school campus in 2017 when Langley Middle School closed its doors. Next school year, sixth graders will also be in the building while fifth graders will relocate to the elementary school's north campus.

With younger students joining the campus, one of the priorities covered by the bond is the creation of separate, clearly distinguishable entrances for middle schoolers versus high schoolers. Kayla Phillips, the middle school principal, explained that it's important for grades 6-8 to maintain an individual identity and culture. The middle schoolers currently eat lunch at different times and attend classes in hallways completely separate from the older students.

"It's that identity, that signage, that understanding that this is my place and this is where I get to spend my three years as a middle schooler, and then I will transition to the high school," Phillips said.

The new entrance will be created near one of the building's cafeterias, which will be rebranded from the New Commons to something Cougar-based, the mascot for South Whidbey Middle School. Students gather in this space before school to socialize, get breakfast and finish homework. Outside, parking spots will be changed to pull-up spots, where parents can easily drop off their students.

The entirety of the parking lot will also need repaving, something that hasn't been done for a while. Phillips pointed out that the updates won't just benefit parents dropping off their younger students, but also high schoolers who are new drivers.

Arguably one of the largest and most visible upgrades will be new siding and roofing for the building, which is an estimated 150,000 square feet. Assistant Superintendent of Business and Operations Dan Poolman explained that the ugly black streaks on the facility's exterior happened because the siding is made of a soft material not suitable for the Pacific Northwest climate and is now crumbling as a result. If it passes, the bond will fund replacement siding that is more appropriate for the region.

"We've had community members (who) wanted to come and do beautification but it's not something that a nice paint job is gonna fix," Phillips said.

John Patton, principal of the high school, agreed.

"We've tried to power wash, we've used all kinds of different solutions and we thought about painting it, and painting was some astronomical number and the thought is, why paint it when we want to replace it?" he said.

Inside the building, water damage likely stemming from issues with the roof has caused unseemly stains on the cinder block walls in the gym and in a room near the auditorium, even creating a sizable hole in a ceiling tile.

Other interior updates are needed. Corridors on the second floor of the school, for example, are dimly and sparsely lit.

"As you can see the lighting is pretty limited ... on those cold, rainy November days, it feels pretty dark and dreary," Phillips said.

One stairwell, which is completely open to an outdoor courtyard, is splattered with bird poop from the many times a feathered creature has gotten stuck inside and can't find its way out. Phillips said a nearby gate across from the courtyard that opens to the back of the school has spaces big enough for critters to fly through and has become a pretty big safety concern that caused teachers to move out of classrooms in the area.

Out in the courtyard, a mix of uneven materials make up its surface, including cracked and missing tiles. Phillips said students have been excited to see renderings of an updated courtyard, which includes more tables and chairs.

"During COVID, as we came back, kids were choosing to eat outside more, which was awesome," she said. "I have a lot of students that like a lot of physical activity. It's a safety factor that we really have to mitigate when they want to throw a football. Material like this is super unsafe for them to be on."

Restrooms, when updated, will be ADA compliant. Patton said gender neutral bathrooms will also help the student population. An elevator, in addition, is in need of some maintenance. New floors are another project.

Student athletes and PE classes will benefit from a resurfaced track and a new artificial turf field. The current grass field constantly needs to be mowed and fertilized, and isn't the most environmentally sustainable.

“When the rain comes, it just gets torn up. The problem is, in the winter, grass doesn’t grow so it’s just kind of a mud pit,” Patton said. “And so our sports in the spring, like our boys soccer, kind of get the short end of the stick because the field is just beat up, where if you have field turf you can use it year-round, in rain, any kind of weather.”

He added that every team in South Whidbey’s league practices on a turf field.

“When our kids go to play on turf fields, there’s a disadvantage already built in because those kids played on it and ours are never on it,” Phillips said.

The building’s crumbling facade is one of the first things visiting sports teams see when they come to play against the Falcons.

“It’s hard for kids to take pride in their school,” Phillips said.

“Our students and community deserve better,” Patton added.

South Whidbey Elementary School North Campus

Built in 1987, the elementary school’s north campus is the newest facility in the district. One of the projects covered by the bond includes a covered walkway from the north campus to the south campus. Although the south campus is getting reconfigured next school year, students will still use the facility for its gym and school garden, explained Valerie Brown, the library media specialist for the district.

Like the high school and middle school campus, some siding will need to be replaced and restrooms will receive an ADA compliant upgrade.

Another project will replace aging playground structures with something more inclusive and accessible for kids with special needs.

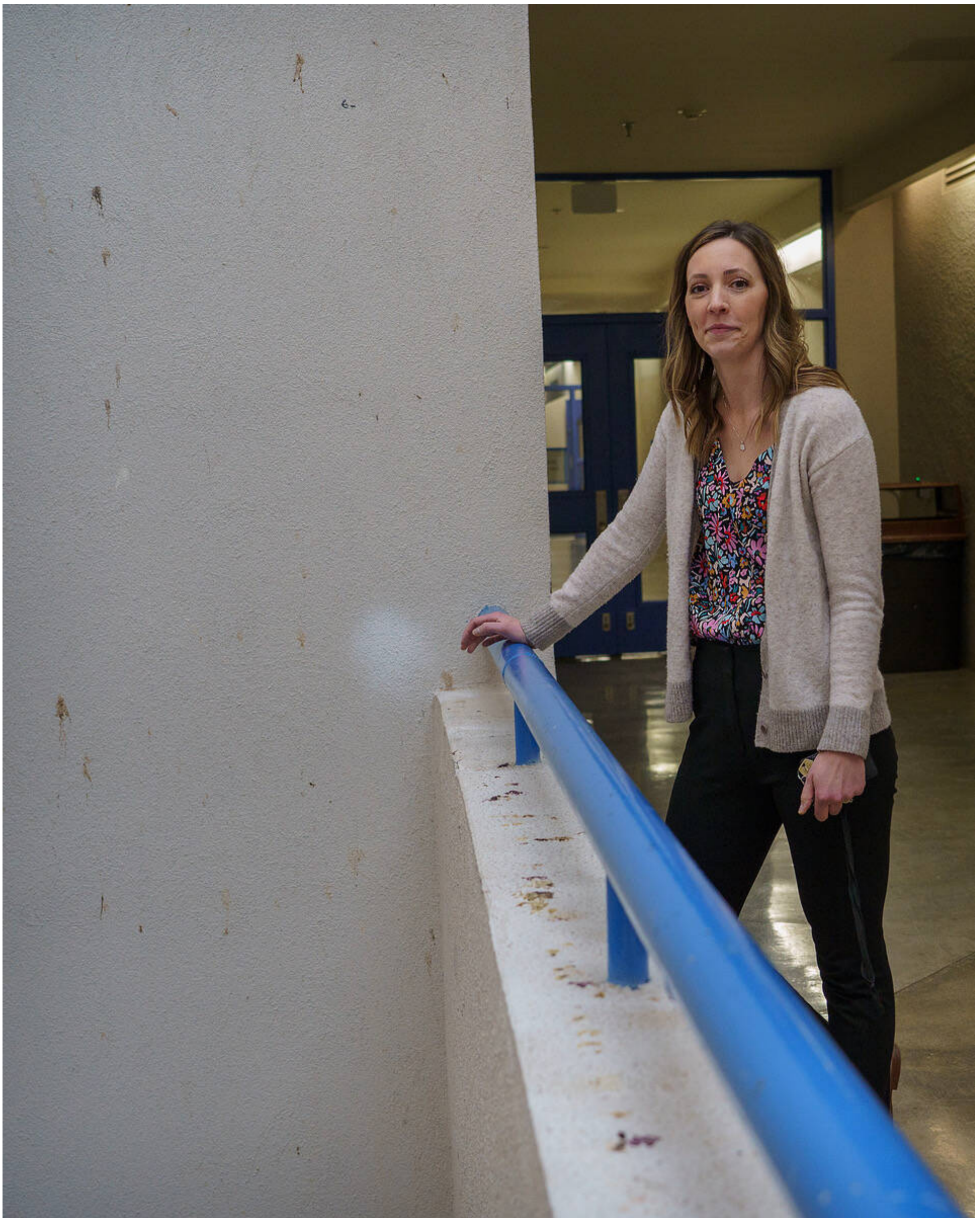
“There are specifically designed structures where you can roll a wheelchair onto a balancing thing or just bringing things more down to ground level, making it safe, adding sensory things to touch and see and move around,” Brown said.

A wooden play structure that is at least 25 years old is set to be replaced.

“The kids still love them, but you can’t roll a wheelchair up to this,” Brown said.

The addition of a covered play structure will keep kids out of the elements during the rainier days of the year.

If the bond passes, funds would not be collected until 2024. Construction would start in April 2024 and finish by 2026. For more information about the measure, visit the “Bond 2023” section of the South Whidbey School District website, sw.wednet.edu/our-district/bond-2023.



South Whidbey Middle School Principal Kayla Phillips stands in an open-air stairwell that's covered in droppings from when birds have gotten stuck inside and cannot find a way out. (Photo by David Welton)



The second floor corridors of the high school/middle school are dimly and sparsely lit. (Photo by David Welton)



A gaping hole in the ceiling of a room near the auditorium points to excessive water damage. (Photo by David Welton)



South Whidbey High School Principal John Patton points out water damage on the cinder block walls of the gym. (Photo by David Welton)



Kindergartener Nicolas Bent plays on an outdated wooden structure at South Whidbey Elementary School North Campus. The proposed bond would provide brand-new inclusive equipment that’s accessible to kids of all abilities. (Photo by David Welton)

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