

AN ECHO PRESS EDITORIAL

Pros outweigh cons in school levy plan

Have you made up your mind whether you will vote yes or no on Alexandria School District's capital project levy authorization that's on the Nov. 4 ballot?

If you're still sitting on the fence wondering what to do, take a few minutes to read this.

Yes, it will raise property taxes for those living in the district, no doubt about it. And the district has been upfront about the cost. The levy will raise about \$3 million for taxes first levied in 2025 and payable in 2026. If passed, the levy will be authorized for 10 years. The estimated cost of the project to be funded over that time period is about \$30 million.

The overall impact would be less than \$10 per month for the average Alexandria home valued at \$350,000.

This isn't money that will be frittered away. It will go toward things that are not only important in helping students learn but also to keep them safe. Over a 10-year period, the levy would go toward improving safety, technology and facilities.

More specifically, here's where your hard-earned money will go: Secure building entrances, visitor check-in systems, security cameras, lockdown tools to ensure student and staff safety, and cyber security improvements to protect sensitive student data.

That's the safety part. Then there is technology infrastructure. Your \$10 a month in taxes will be used to replace outdated devices and upgrade network infrastructure and reduce classroom time spent troubleshooting technology issues.

That's not all. The levy will also go toward making facility upgrades, including critical facility upgrades to career tech spaces, parking lots, heating and cooling systems, playgrounds and outdoor athletic facilities at the middle and high school levels.

Let's look at what could happen if the levy fails. According to school leaders, "The district will face continued funding challenges. This could lead to larger class sizes, fewer

specialists and reduced services for students." This would also delay security improvements, technology upgrades and facility improvements.

Here's something you may not know: Since the 2020-2021 school year, Alexandria Public Schools has already made \$5 million in cuts and relied on reserves to balance the budget. Without new funding, school leaders say, those challenges may worsen.

Those who think the district isn't scrutinizing its budget hard enough, should consider this: Alexandria's school taxes are among the lowest of school districts both locally and around the state. Among 20 school districts in the region with similar demographics, Alexandria ranks sixth lowest. The school taxes for an Alexandria home with an estimated market value of \$350,000 is \$885 – much lower than the top two districts (Sauk Centre and Northfield) with \$1,901 and \$2,234, respectively.

It's clear we have a budget-minded school district with a solid plan for the future, one that will help students and staff, keep everyone safe, and make crucial technology upgrades at a modest cost.

There are a variety of ways to vote: Absentee in-person at the school district office inside Woodland Elementary School, 1410 South McKay Avenue, Alexandria. Hours are 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. through Nov. 3. Extended hours will be 7:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Oct. 28 and Nov. 3. Absentee by mail: send an email to mtimm@alex-schools.org to request an Absentee Ballot Application or call 320-762-4213, ext. 4213. Absentee ballots must be received by Election Day for the vote to count. Go to the polls on Nov. 4 at one of the combined polling places and precincts. Polls will be open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

The benefits of supporting the levy are much greater than opposing it. Voting "Yes" is the right decision to make.

The power of education

As a longtime Minnesotan and a proud member of the Alexandria community, I've seen firsthand how education shapes the future of a community. A strong public education system is one of the most important foundations we can build together as it prepares our young people for success and ensures the vitality of our local economy for generations to come.

At Alomere Health, we know that investing in education isn't just about supporting schools, it's about investing in the future workforce, the future families, and the future leaders who will one day care for and serve our communities.

Quality education attracts quality talent

When Alomere Health recruits new physicians, nurses, and healthcare professionals, one of the first questions they often ask is, "How are the schools?" That question carries a lot of weight. Physicians and other professionals want to raise their families in communities that value education, where their children will be challenged, supported, and given every opportunity to succeed.

The strength of Alexandria Public Schools has been a major factor in our ability to attract and retain top talent. When candidates visit, they quickly see that our schools offer outstanding academic programs, committed teachers, and a wide range of extracurricular activities. Whether it's advanced placement courses, the arts, athletics, or career exploration programs, our school district provides a well-rounded experience that appeals to families and builds confidence in our community's future.

In short, the quality of our educational system doesn't just benefit students, it benefits all of us. Strong schools help bring skilled professionals to our area, keep families here long-term, and sustain a healthy local economy.

Building connections through CAPS

One of the best examples of the partnership between education and local industry is the CAPS program at Alexandria Area High Schools. The CAPS program gives high school students the



CARL VAAGENES
In The Know

opportunity to explore real-world careers through hands-on experiences with local businesses and organizations.

Alomere Health is proud to be one of those partners. We chose to collaborate with CAPS because it reflects our shared commitment to helping students discover their passions and develop practical skills that can translate into future careers. For many students, CAPS is their first chance to step into a professional environment, meet mentors, and see what it's really like to work in healthcare or other fields that make our community thrive.

Our team at Alomere works closely with CAPS students interested in health and science. They get a behind-the-scenes look at hospital operations, patient care, and the variety of career paths available within a healthcare system. Some students have shadowed in clinical departments like laboratory, imaging, and rehabilitation, while others have explored business, human resources, and communications roles that keep a hospital running smoothly.

The CAPS partnership is rewarding for our staff as well. It's energizing to see the excitement in students' eyes as they connect what they're learning in the classroom to real-world possibilities. We hope these experiences help spark a lifelong interest in healthcare and encourage more young people to consider careers in medicine, nursing, or healthcare administration.

More than doctors and nurses
When people think of a hospital, they often think of doctors and nurses and of course, those are critical roles. But what many people don't realize is just how many different types of careers exist within a healthcare organization like Alomere Health.

Our hospital employs professionals in more than 200 different job classifications. Alongside our clinical staff, we have information technology

specialists, accountants, engineers, food service and environmental services teams, marketing and communications professionals, HR specialists, and many others who play essential roles in providing excellent care.

Healthcare is one of the most dynamic industries in the country, and it offers a wide range of career options, many of which can be found right here in our community. From entry-level positions that require on-the-job training to advanced roles that need years of education, there are opportunities for students of all interests and skill sets.

We want today's students to know that their local hospital can be a place to build a rewarding and meaningful career. Whether they're drawn to caring for patients, working with technology, solving problems, or supporting operations behind the scenes, Alomere could be the place for them.

Working together for tomorrow

The future of Alexandria depends on how we prepare our young people today. Strong schools help our children dream big, discover their talents, and find purpose in their work. When local businesses and organizations like Alomere Health step up to partner with our educators, we help bridge the gap between classroom learning and the skills needed in the real world.

That collaboration benefits everyone: students gain direction and confidence, employers develop a stronger local talent pipeline, and the community continues to grow and thrive.

At Alomere Health, we're proud to be part of that shared effort. We believe that supporting education through programs like CAPS, through volunteerism, and through ongoing collaboration with our schools, is one of the most powerful ways we can build a healthier, stronger community for all.

Because when our students succeed, our community succeeds. And that's something we can all be proud of.

Carl Vaagenes is the CEO of Alomere Health in Alexandria. In the Know is a rotating column written by community leaders from the Douglas County area.

1975: Signals approved for Broadway, 15th Ave.

This week in history in Douglas County

"This Week" in 2015, 10 years ago: Work to transform the site of the old Jefferson High School in Alexandria is moving along. The building was demolished this summer and since then, the focus has shifted to getting the site ready for future development. This includes demolishing the accessory buildings, such as the grandstands, ticket booth and running track, along with grading and seeding the site, according to Tom Wacholz, president of ORB Management. "The plan is to make it presentable for the neighborhood and potential buyers," Wacholz said.

1975, 50 years ago: After considerable discussion with state highway officials and others, the city's Highway Committee recommended to the city



RACHEL BARDUSON
Observations from the Archives

council that the state's decision to place the new stop-go light at 15th and Broadway be accepted. The state – which will pay 80% of the project cost – said traffic count indicated that the light should be erected at 15th and Broadway. Local officials felt 14th and Broadway would be more practical but the state threatened to pull out of the agreement if the city insisted on 14th Avenue. It was felt that having a stop light at 15th and Broadway is better than having none at all...so that's where it will go.

2000, 25 years ago: Wids-eth Smith and Nolting, the local architectural and engineering firm has been chosen

to design the expansion of the Douglas County Library. The library, located in the Douglas County Services Center, is directly connected to an area not used for other purposes. That empty 4,600 square foot area will be used to expand library services. Library Director, Trish Cronoy explained that due to increasing county population and the need to provide more books, magazines, audio and video recordings, and children's items, the library needs additional space. The new area will also be used to set up additional computer stations. The cost of the remodeling project has been estimated at \$400,000. Douglas County has already set aside money for the expansion project through its Capital Improvement Plan.

2015, 10 years ago: Alexandria's John Hawkes will be presented with the "The North Star Award of Excellence"

during the sixth annual Twin Cities Film Festival (TCFF). The honor includes a retrospective of Hawkes' acting career, from his first roles from the 1960s to critically acclaimed portraits in *The Perfect Storm*, *Winter's Bone*, *Lincoln* and *The Sessions*. Hawkes, a 1977 graduate of Jefferson High School in Alexandria, also stars in the centerpiece indie film of this year's TCFF – *Too Late*. In this film, Hawkes plays the role of a private investigator who is tasked with tracking down the whereabouts of a missing woman from his own past... During the next few years, Douglas County's Rune Stone Park could undergo a series of improvements. One of the most notable changes would be the construction of a 2,300 square foot visitor center which would likely be located between the Olaf Ohman farm and the sledding hill.

Just for Fun – 1975 – 50

years ago: State Representative Dave Fjoslien said Russ Fridby of the Minnesota Historical Society will be in Alexandria to look at the old Knute Nelson residence located next to the rest home of the same name. The home will soon no longer be able to be used as an annex to the Home facility and there's been requests that the residence be designated an official Minnesota Historical Site.

SPORTS TRIVIA 1975 – 50 years ago: Alexandria jumped off to an early lead and then coasted to a 42-14 triumph over the Morris Tigers in a West Central Conference game played in Morris. The entire Big Red squad saw action in the contest with each player doing his job with maximum efficiency, stated Cardinal coach Ed Christopherson.

Rachel Barduson of Alexandria is a regular contributing columnist to the Echo Press Opinion page.

LETTER

Thank you for supporting the Thursday night Summer Concert Series

BY CHUCK WENCL
PROGRAM DIRECTOR
RED WILLOW ARTS
COALITION
Alexandria, MN

To the editor:
Red Willow Arts Coalition would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to the community for supporting the Thursday night Summer Concert Series.

Thank you to the Douglas County Commissioners for approving the use of our beautiful Courthouse lawn. Echo Press for their weekly preview articles as well as other local

media for spreading the word. Thank You to our ever supportive concert family of lakes area residents, tourists, as well as those who travel from surrounding communities to gather and enjoy great music and fellowship every Thursday! What better way to spend a beautiful Alexandria, Minnesota summer evening!

Thank you to series sponsors, Anderson Funeral Home,

Elden's Fresh Foods and Bethany On The Lake, as well as our loyal local businesses and individuals who sponsor nightly concerts. Their continued support is a huge part of our success.

Like any big project, there are so many people who have helped make these concerts possible. If you have supported us with donations, volunteered your time or assisted

in any other way we are truly grateful.

We have already begun work on the 2026 season, and are striving to bring another great series of Thursday evening musical entertainment to the Courthouse Lawn. See you next summer!