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Approve the St. Johnsbury School Bond

As a legislator representing part of the Northeast Kingdom, I have received dozens of letters, emails and messages describing the deplorable state of some of the facilities of the Kingdom East school district.

Recent stories in the paper highlighted terrible conditions: sewage lines backing up and overflowing toilets; roofs in danger of collapse; high heating bills; mold and water leaks. These kinds of problems are the result of postponed maintenance and lack of investment.

But the temporary savings in past years' budgets now requires emergency repairs and catch-up maintenance — at much higher cost than if the work were done right along and needs were anticipated.

I am extremely concerned about Concord, Burke, Gilman, Lyndonville and the other schools in Kingdom East. But they are not in my legislative district.

St. Johnsbury School is.

Next Tuesday, November 5, St. Johnsbury voters will be asked whether to make necessary investments in our school. The total bond request is just under \$3 million dollars — a big number.

Why so much money? In round numbers, here is what the money is buying:

A third of the money — \$1 million — will be used to reconfigure and "harden" the school entry — harden, because of the rise in gun violence. It is a tragic commentary on our culture, but these are the times we are in.

Another third is replacing one of the three huge oil boilers that has died. The dead oil unit will be replaced with biomass (pellets or woodchips). Wood is better than oil, both because of environmental impacts, and because wood is a local fuel source that supports local jobs. Other upgrades to improve efficiency of new and old equipment will be installed as well.

The last third is 20-year maintenance, replacing pumps, fans, etc., that are at or near the end of their service life. It is smart to do this at the same time as all the other work.

Why now? The entrance reconfiguration is required; we cannot ignore it. As for the heating work, one boiler is already dead. If another one goes during cold weather, school closes until emergency repair or replacement is done (at great expense). We're skating on thin ice this winter, but if we approve the bond, the new boiler will be online next winter.

Approving the bond now also means we go to bid early next year, when contractors have time to sharpen their pencils, and before March votes in other Towns might bring more projects. We are better situated to get competitive bids.

Lastly, these estimated costs do not include possible biomass and efficiency incentives. By starting this project next year, it's more likely such programs will still be available.

Most important, payments on this bond will begin right after we have paid off the initial bond from building the school 20 years ago. That means the impact on the annual budget will be half of what it otherwise would have been — about 0.4% of the total budget.

Our school is a beautiful facility. Our student population has not declined like other schools' has. If we mean to keep it that way, if we intend to attract young families to our town, if we are to continue to rebuild our community, we must make prudent investments in our school.

I feel terrible about the hurdles facing Kingdom East, and I hope the legislature can find a way to help. But right now we in St. Johnsbury have the opportunity to avoid the same fate. Our school board has worked diligently to bring us a wise and conservative proposal.

I intend to support them, and I hope the voters of St. Johnsbury will go to the polls next Tuesday — or before, during early voting — and do so too. Let's approve the bond.