



# January 10 facilities proposals – 50 North Lark and 395 Elk

*Investing in our students. Investing in our community.  
Investing in our future.*

## Frequently Asked Questions

*Updated December 2, 2016*

*Frequently Asked Questions about the two tax-free facilities proposals Albany voters will consider Tuesday, Jan. 10 – 1) a \$6.5 million renovation plan to create a new middle school at 50 North Lark St., and 2) a \$4.1 million proposal to purchase 395 Elk St., current home of West Hill Middle School and proposed future home of the Alternative Learning Center.*

### **Q: When is the vote?**

**Tuesday, Jan. 10, 2017.** Polls will be open 7 a.m.-9 p.m.

### **Q: Where will I vote?**

Voting will take place at the 15 polling places used for the City School District of Albany budget vote each May. Please visit the “Where Do I Vote?” section at [www.albanyschools.org](http://www.albanyschools.org) to find the complete directory. You also can call the board clerk at 475-6010 for help in finding your correct voting location.

### **Q: How much would the work cost? How would that affect my taxes?**

There will be **no impact on taxes** for homeowners or business owners if the referendum is approved. The total cost of both proposals would be \$10.6 million.

**Proposition #1 – 50 North Lark.** The proposal calls for \$6.5 million in renovations. The district would invest \$1.3 million from the Capital Reserve Fund voters established in 2014 to plan for these types of facilities projects. State aid would cover the remaining \$5.2 million (80 percent). **It is important to note that Proposition #1 is only about proposed renovations at 50 North Lark.** The Board of Education already has made the determination to open a new middle school at 50 North Lark next September to address the district’s rapidly growing enrollment at the middle level. The renovations would provide the equitable facilities and programs the board and district believe the students at 50 North Lark would need and deserve.

**Proposition #2 – 395 Elk.** The district is proposing to buy the three-story, 54,000-square-foot building for \$4.1 million. The purchase would be fully funded from the Capital Reserve Fund (*see description in Proposition #1 above, and in the separate FAQ later in this document*). The building

was constructed six years ago for more than \$15 million. The district also would save about \$169,000 in rent payments voters approve the purchase in January, reducing the total proposed investment to about \$3.93 million.

**Neither of these proposals would have any impact on taxes.**

**Q: Why does the district need another middle school?**

The City School District of Albany’s elementary and middle schools are full or nearly full today. The district’s overall enrollment has grown by nearly 1,500 students over the last eight years (18 percent increase), with most of that growth at the elementary and middle levels. That already is causing enrollment pressure. That pressure will continue to grow and there is an urgent need for additional middle-school capacity.

Enrollment in the district’s elementary and middle schools is up more than 26 percent since 2008-09. Based on a [December 2015 demographic study](#), the district anticipates as many as 425 more students in grades 6-8 by the start of the 2025-26 school year.

The district’s two existing middle schools – William S. Hackett Middle School and Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School – along with the prekindergarten-grade 8 school at North Albany Academy do not have enough capacity to serve this growing student population. The district has operated a temporary middle school in a leased building (395 Elk St., West Hill Middle School) since the closure of two Brighter Choice charter middle schools in June 2015, but the district’s current lease expires at the end of the 2016-17 school year.

The district plans to enroll the new middle school at 50 North Lark – currently home to the Alternative Learning Center – with a temporary feeder pattern (*see below for more information*). However, the proposed investment in 50 North Lark is part of the district’s long-term vision for equitable facilities and programming for all students. Once the Board of Education approves a long-range plan for middle-school facilities and enrollment patterns, 50 North Lark would continue to serve district students well into the future. As examples, 50 North Lark could continue as a middle school with a revised feeder pattern, as the district’s permanent home for alternative education or as the home for a “newcomer” program, which would serve the city’s rapidly growing population of refugee families and English-language learners.

**Q: Why does the district need to do this work in order for 50 North Lark to be used as a middle school beginning in 2017-18?**

The school at 50 North Lark Street originally was built for the now-closed New Covenant Charter School. New Covenant operated primarily as an elementary school, so the building is not equipped with many of the academic and support classrooms and offices necessary for middle-school students. Examples include classrooms for science, technology, family and consumer science, instrumental music and special education needing upgrades. The building also is not equipped with a kitchen that is sufficient to provide equitable breakfast and lunch options for students who will

attend the new middle school. The gym and pool areas also are in need of updates and repairs to be able to serve students on a daily basis.

**Q: What other facilities options did the district consider before deciding to propose 50 North Lark as a new middle school?**

The Grade Configuration Steering Committee studied four options before recommending 50 North Lark to the Board of Education earlier this year: Arbor Hill Elementary School, North Albany Academy, 395 Elk (West Hill Middle School) and 50 North Lark.

The committee rejected Arbor Hill for two primary reasons:

- Renovations to convert the elementary school to a middle school would have been extensive and the district would not have been able to complete them in time for the 2017-18.
- The district does not have capacity at its other elementary schools to serve the Arbor Hill students that would have been displaced by a conversion.

The committee rejected North Albany for two primary reasons:

- Renovations to convert the pre-K-8 school to a middle school (grades 6-8) would have been extensive and the district may not have been able to complete them in time for the 2017-18.
- The renovated building's capacity would not have been large enough to meet the district's middle-school enrollment needs.

The committee rejected 395 Elk (West Hill) for two primary reasons:

- The district does not own the building and the current lease ends at the end of the 2016-17 school year.
- Most of the classrooms at 395 Elk/West Hill do not meet State Education specifications for regular instruction. State Ed gave the district clearance to operate 395 Elk as a middle school on a temporary basis due to the sudden closure of the charter schools, but 395 Elk cannot be used for regular education on a permanent, long-term basis (*see separate FAQ below for more information on 395 Elk's ability to accommodate alternative-education programs*).

The committee recommended 50 North Lark because:

- It is located on the north side of the city, a critical equity issue identified by the Grade Configuration Steering Committee, board and district.
- The fewest number of students would be displaced.
- The district already owns the building.
- The building's classrooms meet state specifications for size.
- Renovations could be completed in time for the start of the 2017-18 school year if a referendum is successful.

- The building is large enough to meet the district's anticipated short-term (3-5 years) enrollment needs in grades 6-8.

**Q: What work will be done at 50 North Lark if the referendum is approved?**

To provide equivalent programs with Hackett and Myers, and to be able to meet the needs of all students at 50 North Lark, improvements need to be made to create or improve the following learning spaces:

- Science
- Family and consumer sciences
- Technology education
- Music

Other building improvements included in the proposal that are necessary to provide students and staff at 50 North Lark with facilities equivalent to those at Hackett and Myers:

- Seating capacity, acoustics and stage in the gym
- Full kitchen and serving lines
- Ventilation to interior offices
- Unit ventilator heat pumps and fluid cooler
- Roofing and roof insulation issues in the gym and pool
- Pool dehumidification unit and other pool upgrades

**Q: Which schools will feed into the new middle school at 50 North Lark?**

If the referendum is successful, students currently attending the following elementary schools would attend the new middle school at 50 North Lark beginning with the 2017-18 school year:

- **Arbor Hill Elementary School** (current grades 5-6)
  - Arbor Hill Elementary then would serve students only through grade 5 moving forward.
- **North Albany Academy** (current grades 5-7)
  - North Albany then would serve students only through grade 5 moving forward.
- **Philip Schuyler Achievement Academy** (current grade 5)
- **Sheridan Preparatory Academy** (current grade 5)
- **West Hill Middle School** (current grade 7)
  - West Hill would not serve as a district middle school after the current school year.

This would be an interim enrollment pattern for the new middle school for approximately 3-5 years. The Grade Configuration Steering Committee, and ultimately the Board of Education, will determine the district's long-range middle-school facilities needs and enrollment configuration for grades 6-8. The committee will study those options throughout the 2016-17 school year and is expected to make recommendations to the board for consideration in the spring of 2017.

**Q: If 395 Elk can't accommodate a permanent middle school, how would it be an acceptable location for students in alternative-education programs?**

The building at 395 Elk is not suitable as a middle school because most of the classrooms do not meet State Education Department specifications for regular education. State Ed gave the district clearance to operate 395 Elk as a middle school (West Hill) on a temporary basis due to the sudden closure of the Brighter Choice charter middle schools in June 2015, but 395 Elk cannot be used for regular education on a permanent, long-term basis.

However, 395 Elk is an ideal building for the district's Alternative Learning Center, which is built around smaller class sizes and fewer total students. The building's total capacity is 350-400 students, and there are approximately 140 total students currently attending the Alternative Learning Center. Additionally, 395 Elk was constructed as two separate schools connected in the middle by common areas such as a cafeteria, gym, music rooms and offices. Each side of the building can function independently as a separate school, and the district's plan for alternative education there would be to serve middle-school students on one side and high school students on the other side.

**Q: Are there any other enrollment-related changes planned for 2017-18?**

Yes. The board also has approved a change for Pine Hills Elementary School that would begin with the 2017-18 school year.

Pine Hills currently serves students from prekindergarten through grade 6, and the students move on to Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School for grades 7-8. However, Pine Hills has become one of the district's most overcrowded elementary schools due to its significant enrollment growth in recent years. Pine Hills had fewer than 380 students at the start of the 2010-11 school year. Today, the school has nearly 480 students, and increase of more than 26 percent over those six years.

To relieve the overcrowding at Pine Hills, beginning in 2017-18 Pine Hills will serve students only through grade 5 and its students will attend Myers for grades 6-8.

Myers will have space to accommodate the additional sixth graders due to the interim enrollment plan for 50 North Lark, which will send students from Schuyler Achievement Academy and Sheridan Preparatory Academy to the new middle school for 3-5 years. Schuyler and Sheridan Prep students currently move on to Myers beginning in sixth grade.

**Q: For 50 North Lark, how did the district arrive at that "feeder" pattern, or enrollment model, for the new middle school at that location?**

The elementary schools that will feed into the new middle school on an interim basis were selected for two primary reasons.

First, the district has been without an equitable middle-school program (grades 6-8) on the north side of the city since it closed Philip Livingston Magnet Academy in 2009 due to rapidly declining

enrollment. The primary reason for Livingston’s declining enrollment was the oversaturation of charter middle schools in Albany – seven total charter middle-school programs have been located in Albany since 1999. However, five of those charter schools have failed and closed since 2010, a contributing factor to the district’s current need for additional middle-school capacity, particularly on the north side of the city.

Providing students and families on the north side of the city with an equitable middle school closer to home than Hackett and Myers middle schools has been a priority for the Board of Education and district. Middle school would be much more accessible for most of the students and families who would attend 50 North Lark through the interim enrollment pattern. This would increase opportunities for families to be involved at school, which research consistently demonstrates has a direct connection to increased student achievement.

The interim feeder pattern for the new middle school also would have the least impact on the current middle-school enrollment patterns, and would help alleviate rising enrollment throughout the district’s elementary and middle schools until the board has approved a permanent long-term plan for those grades district-wide.

**Q: What is the district’s plan to ensure that all students in the new middle school at 50 North Lark receive the academic, social-emotional and extracurricular support and opportunities they need and deserve to be successful?**

The district is committed to providing an equitable middle-school experience for all students at 50 North Lark. The new school’s programming would be in line with New York state standards for grades 6-8, the same as the educational experience that is provided for all students at Hackett and Myers.

The district also is committed to providing the new middle school with the social-emotional supports and extracurricular opportunities that all of the school’s students will need to be successful. This would include:

- Strong leadership structure – Principal and two assistant principals
- AVID (Advanced Via Individual Determination) at sixth grade. AVID is a college- and career-readiness system with a curriculum designed to support students in accessing a rigorous program. It provides students with the soft skills (note-taking, organizational skills, collaborative approaches and inquiry-based methods) necessary for academic success. AVID fosters a desire for personal achievement through hard work and determination. AVID is currently in place at Hackett, Myers and North Albany Academy.
- PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports) programming attached to the district’s Response to Intervention (RtI) model for student support and in alignment with the preventative strategies for behavior that forms the base of the district’s new Student Code of Conduct
- Academic Intervention Services (AIS) delivered in an RtI framework so that multiple data points are used to determine individualized intervention for students
- Appropriate guidance staff, social workers and school security

- A full-service social-emotional component in alignment with PBIS, the preventative strategies and new Student Code of Conduct
- Quality after-school programming
- Modified athletic teams (grades 7-8)
- Smart Boards in every classroom, with corresponding training for teachers

**Q: What is the district's plan to make up for the fact that 50 North Lark has no outside fields or viable green space for students to use for physical education and other outdoor activities?**

There are two nearby options for students to participate in outdoor activities related to physical education.

Arbor Hill Park is two blocks away from 50 North Lark and has ball fields and basketball and tennis courts. Students in the district's alternative-education programs currently located at 50 North Lark use these facilities.

The district also owns the large field in front of the former Philip Livingston Magnet Academy on Northern Boulevard. This four-acre field also is available for students at 50 North Lark to participate in outdoor physical education and recreational activities.

**Q: In the early part of the century, the district either renovated or rebuilt its elementary and middle schools. Why didn't the district anticipate the growing enrollment when it built those schools?**

By 2008, district enrollment had declined substantially, particularly at the middle-school level. This was due primarily to the presence of 12 charter schools, the first of which came to Albany in 1999 (New Covenant, at 50 North Lark). Seven of the charter schools had middle-school programs.

The significant oversaturation of charter schools in Albany, along with the national trends of an aging population, lower birth rates and the migration of families to the suburbs led the district to conclude that its declining enrollment was more than a short-term trend.

For example, Philip Livingston Magnet Academy (grades 6-8) dwindled from more than 800 students to about 275 by the 2008-09 school year, when three charter middle schools were operating in Albany. Two additional charter middle schools not envisioned in the 2000s also opened after Livingston closed (the Brighter Choice charter middle schools, which later closed in June 2015).

As charters grew and overall enrollment in district schools fell through the 2000s, the district seized the opportunity to expand prekindergarten in its elementary schools, which originally were renovated and rebuilt as schools that would serve primarily students from kindergarten through grade 5. The district had about 200 prekindergarten seats in the early 2000s, when the elementary- and middle-school facilities project began. Today, the district serves more than 1,000 prekindergarteners, with about half of those seats located in the district's 12 elementary schools.

In the meantime, the charter-school trend began to reverse. Since 2010, the state has closed five of the original 12 charter schools (all five included middle-school programs) because of poor student performance. A majority of those students returned to Albany's public schools. Over the 17-year span of the charter-school era in Albany, the state has approved seven charter middle-school programs. Today, only two remain in operation serving students in grades 6-8 – KIPP and Albany Community.

**Q: How would technology be used in the new middle school at 50 North Lark to enhance student learning?**

Our planning for instructional technology at 50 North Lark will set the stage for this new school to serve as the prototype for technology integration throughout our school district. A philosophical shift is afoot in regard to how learning environments look and function, influenced largely by technological advancements and a belief that classrooms should be more interactive – mirroring the workplaces of today and the future. That new look puts a high priority on access to mobile devices and digital resources and content, supported by flexible classrooms and learning spaces.

The access allows students to more easily become active participants in learning and creators of knowledge as opposed to passive learners. This model also links teachers to their students and to professional content, resources and systems to help them improve their own instruction and personalize learning.

Each classroom will have a centralized digital display, and an interactive whiteboard to allow for whole-group and other teacher- or student-led digital activities that all may be a part of. The network infrastructure for 50 North Lark is being designed in accordance with this philosophy, leveraging next-generation wireless architecture and security. Moving away from "fixed" technology in favor of more mobile and flexible solutions, we provide the opportunity for all learning spaces and content areas to deliver similar instruction and support learning goals.

**Q: Will the new middle school have its own modified athletic teams?**

All students in grades 7-8 at 50 North Lark would be eligible to participate on the district's modified athletic teams. Transportation would be provided to practices and games, typically held at Myers Middle School or Albany High School. The exception would be basketball. The new middle school at 50 North Lark would have its own modified basketball teams for both boys and girls beginning in 2017-18.

**Q: What will happen to the Alternative Learning Center programs currently located at 50 North Lark?**

As noted above, the district is proposing to buy the current West Hill Middle School building at 395 Elk St. If that proposal is successful Jan. 10, all Alternative Learning Center programs would relocate to 395 Elk for the 2017-18 school year.

**Q: Is this new middle school at 50 North Lark intended to be permanent or temporary?**

The renovated building at 50 North Lark definitely is a part of the district’s long-term facilities and enrollment planning. Its specific use after the interim 3- to 5-year period will be based on recommendations the Grade Configuration Steering Committee is expected to make to the Board of Education in the spring of 2017, and on the board’s decisions following those recommendations. The feeder pattern of schools that will attend 50 North Lark is temporary (*see FAQ above*), pending the board’s actions on a permanent plan for enrolling all of its elementary and middle schools to provide equitable programs and services for all students in all grades district-wide.

If 50 North Lark is not designated as a middle school in the long-term plan, other uses could be as a permanent home for the district’s alternative-education programs (less likely if voters approve the proposed purchase of 395 Elk on Jan. 10) or as the home for a “newcomer” program to serve the district’s rapidly growing population of refugee students and English-language learners.

**Q: If the proposed new middle school is only temporary, why would the district invest \$6.5 million there even if there would be no tax impact?**

The building at 50 North Lark is an important part of the district’s long-term, permanent facilities planning, even if its use changes after the current proposed 3- to 5-year period. The Grade Configuration Steering Committee will make recommendations to the Board of Education next spring for long-term, permanent middle-school facilities and enrollment options, and 50 North Lark will be part of that long-range plan.

The school at 50 North Lark could serve in one of the following capacities beyond the current temporary proposed plan:

- Continue as a middle school with a new enrollment pattern
- Home to an expanded alternative-education program programs (less likely if voters approve the proposed purchase of 395 Elk on Jan. 10)
- Home to a new “newcomer” school that would serve the district’s rapidly growing population of refugees and English-language learners.

**Q: Although the Jan. 10 facilities proposals would have no tax impact, will there be an impact on taxes related to staffing for either 50 North Lark or 395 Elk?**

If both tax-free propositions are successful Jan. 10, the district’s plan is to relocate the Alternative Learning Center to 395 Elk. All staff positions currently assigned to the ALC would transfer to the new location. No additional staffing would be needed.

In terms of staffing the new middle school at 50 North Lark, existing staff positions will transfer to the new middle school from the schools where the grade configuration will change due to the 50 North Lark enrollment pattern (*see related FAQ above*). Schools that would have staff positions shift to 50 North Lark are Arbor Hill Elementary School, North Albany Academy and West Hill Middle School.

Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School and Pine Hills Elementary School also could have staff positions available to transfer to the new middle school, depending on enrollment at those schools for 2017-18.

In addition to the existing staff positions that will transfer to the new middle school, there will be a need to hire additional staff to serve the growing student population that is driving our need for the new middle school. That would be part of the district's regular budget-development process through the winter and spring.

The district will need to hire additional staff to serve our growing student population irrespective of the outcomes Jan. 10 (the new middle school at 50 North Lark will open whether or not Proposition #1 is approved; as noted above, that vote is about renovations to provide equitable facilities and programs for the students who will attend that middle school beginning next September).

As the district does each year during its budget-development process, it would look to balance the needs of all students district-wide with the needs of the taxpayers. The current school year marks the second time in six years that the district has delivered a budget with zero tax-levy increase, and the fourth time in six years that the increase has been less than 1 percent. The district's average tax-levy increase over the past six years is 1.05 percent.

During that time, the district's enrollment has grown by about 1,000 students, or 12 percent (it has grown by about 1,500 students, or 18 percent, over the past eight years). The district will be intent on maintaining that fiscally responsible planning and decision-making through the 2017-18 budget-development process once again as it strives to serve all students and the entire community.

**Q: What is the Capital Reserve Fund? Where did the money in the fund that will go to this project come from?**

Saving for future projects, acquisitions and other allowable purposes is an important planning consideration for school districts. Reserve funds provide a mechanism for saving money to finance all or part of future infrastructure, equipment and other requirements. Reserve funds also can provide a degree of financial stability by reducing reliance on debt to finance capital projects and acquisitions. In general, reserve funds have specific intended purposes and requirements as set forth in law. **District voters approved the establishment of the Capital Reserve Fund, and also must vote to approve any deposits to the fund as well as the use of any money from the fund.**

A Capital Reserve Fund can be used for capital improvements or acquisitions. In anticipation of future building needs, the district first funded a Capital Reserve **with voter approval** in May 2014. The original and subsequent **voter-approved** funding came from budget savings realized over the years. The current balance in the Capital Reserve Fund is \$9.5 million. **With voter approval**, the district can utilize these funds to improve the 50 North Lark facility and purchase 395 Elk, as well as meet other anticipated future needs for a permanent middle school, specialized programs and maintenance of our 20 existing buildings.

**Q: What is the Grade Configuration Steering Committee?**

The Grade [Configuration Steering Committee](#) consists of some 30 parents, teachers, principals and community members charged with studying existing grade configuration and recommending possible long-term enrollment scenarios for elementary and middle schools. The committee began its work in May 2015. The first phase of its work finished in June 2016 and included the recommendation that the district would need a new third middle school beginning with the 2017-18 school year due to increasing enrollment. The Board of Education approved that recommendation. The second phase of the committee’s work began in September 2016. The committee is expected to make recommendations for long-term enrollment options to the board in 2017.

**Q: What will happen to the Arbor Hill Community Center once the new middle school opens at 50 North Lark?**

The district owns the entire 50 North Lark building, which includes the Arbor Hill Community Center on the back part of the building. The district has a lease arrangement with the City of Albany that provides shared use of the community center section for both entities. The proposed capital project would not change the lease agreement. Therefore, the same lease will continue to dictate the use of the community center section if voters approve the referendum Jan. 10.

**Q: What happens if the 50 North Lark and/or 395 Elk proposals are not approved?**

With Proposition #1 on Jan. 10, the district is proposing renovations at 50 North Lark to provide equitable facilities and programs for the students who will attend the new middle school beginning in September 2017. **The vote on Proposition #1 is about renovations the district believes would provide all students at 50 North Lark with the resources they need to succeed. The vote is not about whether or not to create the new school; the Board of Education already has made that determination based on the Phase 1 recommendations of the Grade Configuration Steering Committee (see related FAQs above).** The new middle school at 50 North Lark will need to open in September whether or not the Jan. 10 vote is successful and the renovations are approved – the question for voters is about the type of middle school they want the students to attend.

As noted earlier in this document, the district urgently needs more space to accommodate its rapidly growing enrollment, especially at the middle-school level. If the 50 North Lark referendum is not approved Jan. 10, there would not be enough time to schedule another vote that would allow the necessary renovations to be completed at 50 North Lark in time for the 2017-18 school year. Because of its urgent space needs at the middle level, the district would then be forced to prepare to operate 50 North Lark in “as is” condition. The district believes this is not a suitable or equitable option for middle-school educational programming. However, it could be an option if the 50 North Lark referendum fails Jan. 10.

Another less-than-favorable option that the district believes would disadvantage students if Proposition #1 fails could be to divert some of the students from 50 North Lark back to Hackett and

Myers. However, this would add to the anticipated overcrowding those schools. North Albany Academy also could serve some students beyond fifth grade if Proposition #1 does not succeed.

Another variable the district may have to contend with if the 50 North Lark proposal fails is the status of the 395 Elk/West Hill Middle School facility. If Proposition #2 to buy 395 Elk also fails, the district could try to negotiate another lease for 2017-18. However, if the district was unable to come to terms on another lease agreement for 395 Elk, that building would not be available for any district purpose in 2017-18. In this scenario, the district likely would have to maintain the Alternative Learning Center programs at 50 North Lark and resort to a “worst-case scenario” option that would include severe overcrowding at Hackett and Myers.

The district would consider these alternatives only if voters reject one or both of the tax-free proposals Jan. 10. **Both proposals are intended to provide equitable facilities for all middle-school students district-wide** and play a significant role in the district’s overall long-term planning for all students, programs and facilities.

**Q: I have more questions. Who can I contact?**

Please contact Director of Communications Ron Lesko at 475-6065 or [rlesko@albany.k12.ny.us](mailto:rlesko@albany.k12.ny.us) if you have additional questions about the Jan. 10 vote. You also can use the Feedback form available from the left-hand links at [www.albanyschools.org](http://www.albanyschools.org) to send us your questions or comments.