Why do we need to update the facilities?
On the one hand, it's been almost 40 years since we've done anything major in any of the three schools. We've updated the boilers, kept the roofs from leaking and updated the hallways in the high school, but those are the biggest changes the schools have seen in almost 40 years. Some systems like electrical are badly in need of updates. And we have a portable that is over 40 years old when its projected life is ~15 years.

On the other hand, education has changed a lot in those 40 years. Most noticeably, students do not just sit in one classroom their whole day any more. Students break out into small groups for differentiated instruction and for hands on learning. Schools also now (as required by law) address the needs of special education students, gifted and talented students and English language learners. All of these needs require support spaces (e.g. conference breakout rooms) that just were not built into our schools 40-80 years ago. Overall the number of classrooms in our schools are sufficient, but the number of support spaces are woefully inadequate - we literally hold meetings in spaces that would be better described as closets. The accessibility of our facilities to students with disabilities is also badly behind the times.

There are also increased needs and expectations around safety and specifically the ability to control who enters the building and to rapidly communicate throughout the school during school hours.

An independent assessment of enrollment was conducted by NESDEC in January 2018. NESDEC is certified by the state to do enrollment projections for state-funded school projects. They estimate that our enrollment across the district will increase from current levels of 750-780 to about 855 by 2021-2022 and up to 897 a decade from now. Admittedly the long-term projections are best available guestimates, but the 2021-2022 numbers are based on children already born and living in Orono (and sending towns). These increasing enrollment numbers will place additional demands on our buildings, and in particular will push beyond the breaking point our current cafeterias and kitchens which are already so badly undersized and outdated such that they negatively impact our ability to schedule educational programming not to mention nutritional needs.

What will it cost to address these issues?
To build three new schools from scratch would cost about $100 million. To substantially renovate our three existing schools would cost $30-$50 million. The initial facilities assessment by an architectural firm put our needs at $28.8 million. The superintendent and school board have conducted an
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extensive process involving community input at three public forums (with mailers sent to every citizen in Orono), extensive work with an architectural firm, and subcommittees containing a mix of community members and staff. We have arrived at a plan that we believe can meet our needs for the next 20 years for $16.8 million. This is the total project cost, covering every aspect of construction from permitting to architectural fees.

How will you pay for this? Won’t the state pay for this?

There are two major state programs for funding school facilities work. The major construction program provides money for new construction or substantial renovation of school buildings. This program is not currently funded by the state and applications may not open again for 5 years or more. Typically only the 10 or so schools most in need throughout the state get funded. The school board in consultation with the architects believes our middle school which was built in 1938 is a good candidate for funding through this program. Thus we are not doing anything except essential maintenance for the middle school and plan to actively pursue state funding for a major renovation of the middle school when this program becomes available again.

The state also provides a “Revolving Renovation Fund” for critical repairs. Although not currently available, we believe that this program could start up again as soon as this year. We can receive money for high priority repairs including electrical, roofs, school safety, disability accessibility (ADA). We have identified over $1 million in repairs that we will defer with the plan to pursue state funding when it becomes available.

The remaining needs (updates and extensions to Asa and the High School) do not seem likely to qualify for state funding for at least a couple of decades. Yet the school board has decided these updates are urgent (with nothing having been done for 40 years). At a price of $16.8 million this is not pursuable as part of our regular operating budget. Nor is it possible the citizens of Orono could raise this amount of money from donations. Thus the school board is pursuing a bond to be paid back over approximately 20 years to finance this work. As a school district we will qualify for low interest bonds. Most state and municipal construction is funded by such bonds (including the current Orono town offices, library and public works facility).

What is the process for these bonds?

Any bond must be first recommended by the school board. The voters will then have their say, voting to approve or reject the bond. If approved, the RSU will then work with a bond agency to sell the bonds and obtain access to the funds. The costs of the bond will then be spread in roughly equal payments over 20 years. In this sense it is very comparable to homeowners having a 20 year mortgage to buy or build a house.

What exactly will the bond cover at Asa Adams?

There are two main projects we are hoping to undertake at Asa:

- **Split the multi-use gym/cafeteria.** The current gym/cafeteria will become only the gym. A new cafeteria will be built in the space between the current gym and music room. This will give much more flexibility in scheduling and use of these spaces. We will also get a dedicated orchestra room (the current kitchen) which will allow for other uses of the stage. And the new
kitchen will allow for more innovative food service and will provide additional ADA-compliant toilets.

- **Redo the entrance to the school.** This update will do several things. It will provide a more secure entrance to the building with a double door entry system and human eyes on the entrance. It will also replace the current “carport” to provide a nicer waiting area for parents and generally a more visually appealing entrance (see architectural rendering below). This new construction will also create substantial increases in the amount of educational support space for special education, Ch 104, ELL, differentiated learning, etc. needs.

In the construction process two classrooms will move from where the cafeteria is being built to where the office is now. The plan is classroom neutral (no change in number of classrooms) with the emphasis on increasing the badly needed support spaces. The parking lots will also be updated. The electrical systems will be updated, the rotting wood siding will be replaced and improvements to ADA accessibility will be done.

Although the auditorium will be physically located next to the high school, this new space will be shared across the three schools with equal priority in scheduling and should be able to accommodate all Asa concerts (avoiding the need to spend a day travelling to the university for dress rehearsals). Visiting speakers (such as authors) can also be hosted in the new auditorium.

*Architectural rendering of new entrance to Asa. Parent waiting area is to the right of the entrance. Behind the parent waiting area is an office with administrator eyes-on a double door entry system and additional support spaces.*
Floor plan for work at Asa (new cafeteria & kitchen shown in blue & green at top left). Orchestra moves to old kitchen in blue at top middle. New support spaces and entrance shown in orange at middle bottom. Moved classrooms and increased support space shown in purple center.

What will be done at Orono Middle School?
As noted, our intention is to apply for state funding to perform major renovations at the middle school as soon as the program is available again. For this reason we will be doing essential repairs only, such as electrical, so as not to jeopardize our qualifying for future funding. We also hope to renovate the existing choir or “STEAM” room located in the middle school to be able to accommodate the central administration office (superintendent and special education director) so that we can eliminate the 40 year old portable at the front of the middle school/high school (since this is not student space it should not affect our ability to qualify for state funding).

The cafeteria, kitchen, and band and choir rooms that will be built or renovated at OHS described below are also used by OMS students who will thus also benefit from these improvements.

What will be done at Orono High School?
There are four main updates occurring at the high school:

- The existing cafeteria, stage and band room will be renovated to provide an expanded cafeteria and kitchen space. The breezeway will be removed. This will provide a significant update to the one space used by every student every day. (An architectural rendering is shown below). It will also eliminate the scheduling constraints on getting all of our students
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through the lunchroom that right now prevent many educational improvements to the schedule
that we would like to make.

- The choir and band room will be moved to a central location enabling the construction of other
  spaces in their existing locations.
- Four classrooms (two stories) will be added at the end of the existing science/foreign language
  wing to address increased enrollment projected at the high school.
- The office area will receive some minor renovations to provide a more secure entrance and to
  obtain additional educational support spaces (the old kitchen will also be repurposed for
  educational support spaces).

Other essential repairs such as electrical and roof repairs will be performed. The back parking lot will
be expanded with a net of 75 more spaces and repaved.

Middle school and high school plans. Renovation of the STEAM room to accommodate the central
office is in orange on the top left. Renovation to the support spaces (including current office and
guidance) to gain a more secure entrance and an extra support room is in orange bottom center.
Addition of four new class rooms (two stories) is in purple on the bottom right. Renovation of the
existing cafeteria/stage/band room into an enlarged cafeteria in kitchen is center top in green & blue.
Addition of an auditorium and movement of the band and choir spaces is in green at the center top.
What will be done in shared facilities?
An auditorium will be built and the current track/football field will be redone. These spaces are shared across the three schools as well as the broader community. We expect that the wider Orono community will find additional uses for these exciting new spaces. The community already uses the track, and having an auditorium opens up many opportunities for the community as well.

The existing track surface has degraded to the point where it has not been usable since 2010. The new replacement track will be a modern 8-lane track with all the throwing and jumping areas for field events. The inside of the track will have a lighted, natural-grass competition field that can be used for football and soccer.

The auditorium will have 460 seats and a good sized stage. Fifty of the seats at the front will be movable to allow for flexibility in the configuration for an orchestra area, stage extension, or interactive space. The entrance will be shared with the entrance to the gym and provide spaces for ticket sales and concessions and more toilets (ADA accessible). The planning committee has identified over 40 uses for the auditorium including of course concerts and plays, but also, invited artists and authors, multi-class events, all-staff meetings, and community events.
Rendering of updated track and competition field

Architectural rendering of the auditorium from the back towards the stage.
These shared spaces will provide some opportunities for rentals to those outside the community. While not providing large sums of money, such rentals will likely go far towards paying for the upkeep of the facilities. They will also allow Orono to host regional and state-wide competitions. Hosting these types of events at our school facilities will be good for local businesses as visitors will certainly shop and eat in Orono during their visit.

We know that some people consider these shared spaces (track, auditorium) as non-educational spaces. However, they are used for class instruction including physical education and music classes. Our current use of university facilities for concerts has educational costs beyond these classes – a day of school is lost for every concert to bus students to the university for a dress rehearsal. And we have to schedule school events around the mostly full calendar of university events.

It is also important to note that these two components represent less than one third of the total cost with over 2/3 of the cost devoted to “in-school” improvements. We are not building “luxury” versions of these items.

For all these reasons, students at most neighboring towns already have access to a track and an auditorium on their own school campus. As a result these shared spaces are essential in recruiting students from sending towns. Orono competes every year with John Bapst, Hampden, Bangor, Old Town, and other schools for students. It is our belief that these spaces will play an important role in recruiting students from sending towns. Orono currently receives about $1.4 million in tuition from these students. This helps to cover fixed costs like utilities, principals, superintendent, etc. that have to be paid regardless of how many students we have, thereby directly saving Orono tax payers
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substantial money. These facilities (along with the improved curb appeal from new entrances) will also help make Orono a more attractive town to families deciding where to move.

When will construction start and end? What will the process look like?
If the bond passes in June 2019, then we would immediately begin the process of producing detailed architectural drawings and bidding the project. Construction would likely begin in spring 2020. It would run for 18-24 months (so finishing by spring 2022) (with some parts finishing earlier). We should not fool ourselves. Construction will be noisy and disruptive. It will likely involve some classes in portables at Asa and possibly at the high school. But it is cheaper to do the construction quickly and it is our belief that this will also be the best educational outcome in the long run. Extra costs for safety fences, dust containment, etc., are all built into the project costs to ensure that the schools will be 100% safe during the project.

This bond does not touch most of the insides of the schools. Don't the schools need an update?
The school board has been wanting to invest more in upkeep in our schools for several years. But it made little sense to do so until we had a master plan that told us which areas were going to be kept and which were going to undergo major renovations. Now that we have this plan, we are planning, starting in the coming budget year, to add to our annual budget for maintenance and upgrade projects. This amount is of minimal tax impact (we expect a 0% increase in taxes this year despite more investment in maintenance), but it will enable us to do a rolling update through our buildings providing updates to our classrooms such as new paint, in some cases new ceilings, floors and lighting, as well as new furniture. Also included are updates for common areas such as libraries, teacher workspaces, hallways, etc.

Why are all of the identified projects going to be bundled together in one project and one bond referendum question?
There are two primary reasons for the combined structure for the project and bond. First, project costs are lower if all projects are bid together with construction taking place as flexibly as possible for the contractors. If we broke the bond into separate pieces we would have to raise the total cost of the bond. Secondly, the project is interdependent, as many of the pieces are like dominoes with one change precipitating another change. For example, we can’t accomplish the cafeteria expansions without displacing other spaces which have to be accommodated in the project. We could not move forward with this project by segmenting into pieces for consideration and execution independent of one another.

Shouldn't the schools figure out their basic budget issues before asking for more funding?
Every year RSU 26 goes through an extensive public budgeting process starting in January and running through May. Each budget then gets approved by Orono voters first at an annual meeting and then in a June ballot. We know there are all kinds of rumors about school budgets. But here are the facts:

- Our average expenses (the only thing we control) have increased by about 3.2%/year. When you consider that inflation has varied between 2-3% and that our student enrollments have been increasing by 1-3%, this means our cost per pupil in inflation-adjusted dollars has been basically flat or even decreased a tiny bit over many years.
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- It is true that taxes have gone up in those same years, but as suggested by the flat expenses, this is entirely driven by a declining share of revenues from the state (something the town has also struggled with). Nearly every town in the area has seen tax rates rise at levels similar to Orono due to this change in the state’s unwillingness to fund towns and schools. The only alternative has been to significantly cut service levels at the school as one neighboring town has done, but we do not believe this is what the Orono community wants.
- We care a great deal about tax burden. This year (2019-20 school year), we project the school budget to have a 0% local tax increase. This demonstrates that whenever the state carries their share of the costs for education, we are able to have minimal impact on your taxes.

Each year our budget passes with 65-85% of the vote. We are grateful that the town supports educating our students, but we also feel that we have been responsible and have earned this support.

**What benefits will I receive if I have no children or family in the schools?**

Some things to think about include:

- All members of the community use these spaces for attending games, running on the track, going to the Farmer’s Market and we hope in the future attending community events in the auditorium
- If you had children in the schools in the past or will have children in the schools in the future, public school funding in the US works by sharing the burden of education across all citizens, not just the parents of current school age children
- A well-educated society has many benefits to our state’s and country’s economy, civics and social fabric
- Schools are one of the best available investments to encourage people to move into the town and to sustain property values

**What will the tax impact of the school facilities bond be?**

The biggest impact on taxes will be the need to raise taxes to pay off the bond. If approved by the voters the bonded (essentially borrowed) amount would not exceed the approved amount of $16,845,000. RSU 26 currently has one bond that we are still paying off for 7 more years (primarily used to provide energy efficient heating). We plan to structure the new bond so that payments on all bonds (two for the next 7 years, one for the remaining period) are constant. This means payments on the bond project currently under discussion would be smaller for the next 7 years while we pay off the existing bond. Using a best available estimate for the interest rate on the bond, this means that current bond payments of $260,000-$285,000 will increase due to the currently proposed project by about $815,000-$950,000 leading to a total bond payment of $1,075,000 to $1,235,000. Payments of that size will continue for the next 23 years. Converting the increased payment of $815,000-$950,000 to a tax rate requires assumptions about the value of property in Orono. Using the most recent year’s valuations, the increased payment for bonds amounts to an increase of 1.93 mill in an average year (exact payments of bonds vary from year to year) relative to current budgets. The combined impact of bonds (school construction) on taxes would then remain constant for 23 years. For an average-priced Orono house of $170,000 with a homestead exemption this amounts to $289.83/year in new taxes or $0.79/day. For a home valued at $120,000 this amounts to $193.22/year. And for a more expensive home of $270,000 this amounts to $483.04/year.
There will be a slight increase in operating costs due to the new spaces. We estimate increased operating costs will include $23,850/year for increased utility (heating, electricity) costs. We also estimate an increase of $26,000/year for staff to maintain the spaces. We further estimate that we will save $5,225 in fees to the university and busing costs to the university to use their track and auditorium spaces. Thus the net impact on annual operating costs is an increase of $44,625/year. This represents only about 0.3% of the annual budget. This amount is much smaller than the year to year variations in revenue, meaning it is unlikely to be an important factor in future taxes, although in a worst case scenario it represents 0.09 of a mill ($13.50/year of taxes on an average Orono home) increase. While we anticipate being able to host events like regional and state competitions to raise an additional $3000-$5000/year, these are uncertain so we have not included them in the estimates.

**What are the plans if the bond is not approved?**
There is no alternative funding source for this work. If the bond fails, the schools will either have to figure out how to get by without these updates (which as pointed out in the first question will be very hard), or work on identifying why the bond failed, adjust the project, and submit it for voter approval in the future.

**Where can I get more information?**
You can contact the Superintendent’s office at mhiggins@rsu26.org or 207-866-7110. You can also contact the board chair at bmcgill@rsu26.org or other board members whose addresses may be found at https://www.rsu26.org/district-school-board/. There will also be a public hearing on the bond on May 28th at 6PM in the town council chambers.