

# Crowded Mat-Su Schools Need Bonds

Providing a quality education for our children is, and always will be, a priority.

The Valley's school population is exploding. The increase in the number of school age kids is enough to build one new school per year.

Building new schools can be costly. That's why we worked hard to pass legislation that allows us to build much-needed schools for only pennies on the dollar. The state is willing to pay the majority of the cost for new school construction, but voters must approve bonds during the May 2 special election.

Goose Bay Elementary is reaching a crisis point. More than 600 students are attending a school designed for 444. Five portables are used for classes and two more are needed this year. Overcrowding has forced classes to be taught in the lunchroom and a supply room.

The overcrowding problem at Goose Bay will only get worse. Mat-Su School District officials say as many as ten new students enroll in the school each week. Total enrollment is expected to hit 700 next fall.

This situation is unacceptable. The predicament at Goose Bay is just a preview of what will happen in the next few years to schools throughout the Borough unless we take action now.

The proposed \$39.7 million school bond package will pay for two new elementary schools, one in the Knik-Goose Bay area and another in the south Palmer region. It also includes renovations to Wasilla High and Middle Schools, the Borough's most overcrowded secondary facilities.

Mat-Su property taxpayers will score a tremendous tax break on these bonds. The state will pay a minimum of 60 percent of the construction cost on one school and up to 70 percent on the other, for a contribution totaling \$28 million. The bond reimbursement expires in October. It's critical we get these bonds approved as quickly as possible.

For those who think the special election is a waste of money, keep in mind that a single portable classroom costs our taxpayers at least \$80,000 and that Goose Bay Elementary alone needs two more of them by the end of the year.

It's financially responsible to address school overcrowding with new schools. We can stop unnecessary spending on portables with \$80,000 price tags. Approving the bonds this spring allows the design process to begin up to six months in advance and get the new schools open earlier.

Our community will need more new schools in coming years. We must take advantage of every state dollar made available.

We will continue to bring state dollars home to Mat-Su, providing relief to local taxpayers. However, we need your help. Approving bonds now demonstrates to our colleagues our community's collective commitment to education. It will make it easier for us to secure more state dollars this session and into the future.

For those without children, please remember that good K-12 public schools are a cornerstone of economic development. When business leaders look at a community and decide whether or not to locate in that area, the quality of the schools plays a highly influential role in the selection process. The most talented employees, the best and the brightest, demand good schools for their children. Industries with high paying jobs and educated employees will inject valuable tax dollars into our economy, lessening the burden on individual property owners.

A good school system is the foundation for our community's future. We ask all eligible Mat-Su voters to take the time to go to the polls on May 2<sup>nd</sup> and vote "yes" on the school bonds. Our children, our community, depend on it.

*Sen. Lyda Green and Sen. Charlie Huggins represent the Mat-Su Valley in the Alaska Senate.*