

# Town mulls choices for local investment

*Improvement bonds may be on ballot*

**BY RYAN C. TUCK**  
ASSISTANT CITY EDITOR

The Chapel Hill Town Council approved Tuesday the introduction of five bond orders that could become referendums on the Nov. 4 ballot.

The council will decide at its Sept. 8 public hearing whether it will allow the bond orders to become voter referendums on the upcoming ballot and for what value.

The orders comprise one bond for expansion and improvements to Chapel Hill Library on Estes Drive, and the remaining four seek money for capital improvements to the town's overarching green infrastructure project.

Council members approved a bond order of about \$16.3 million for the library improvements and about \$13.1 million for the green infrastructure enterprise, which

includes improvements to local sidewalks, streets, parks, recreation areas and greenways, public open spaces and buildings.

The sidewalk and street bond was recommended by the Committee on Sustainability, Environment and Energy, which was appointed by the council. Increasing neighborhood, pedestrian and bicycle safety and an upgrade in pedestrian amenities are included in this bond.

The greenways bond proposal is for the preservation of parks and

recreational areas and is an attempt to establish a tax base for preventing urbanization in preserved areas. An open spaces bond was recommended to maintain a minimum of undeveloped public land, and the proposed bond on public buildings would pay to improve the energy efficiency of existing public facilities.

If the bonds become referendums, their enactment falls into the hands of local voters. Approved referendums will authorize the town to subsidize the ensuing debt, said Jim Baker, town finance director.

"The amount of debt it leads to increased taxes (for the voters) in order to make debt payments," Baker said.

Although residents might face a larger tax burden in order to fund bond orders totaling more than \$29.3 million, an increase in overall tax payments is not automatic, explained council member Edith Wiggins.

"When we have bonds out there being retired, nothing can happen," she said. "In actuality, people may never notice (an increase in taxes)."

Baker said that when bonds are adopted, the council has the ability to finance them during a seven-year period.

This leads to debt payments in installments and decreases the likelihood that taxpayers will see a significant increase.

The council approved a set of

bonds totaling \$13.1 million in 1996, and the payments on the final bond in that package were initiated in March 2002. Baker said this type of debt payment schedule will enable retired bonds to cycle out as new bonds are issued.

"It's a rolling and continuing process; bonds continue to be paid off and new ones brought in," he said.

Bonds worth about \$1.3 million are retired each fiscal year.

Sept. 8 will be the last forum for concerned citizens to voice their opinions on the bond orders before the council votes whether to make them ballot referendums.

For complete information on the bonds' contents, visit the council's web site at <http://townhall.townofchapelhill.org>.

Contact the City Editor at [citydesk@unc.edu](mailto:citydesk@unc.edu).

# Petition assails systems' consolidation

**BY NICK EBERLEIN**  
ASSISTANT CITY EDITOR

Distressed by a possible merger between Orange County's two local school systems, area parents have begun a cyberspace initiative to urge county officials let voters address the issue in a referendum.

The Internet petition asks the Orange County Board of Commissioners to grant voters the right to decide on a merger, which the parents oppose.

"We're a democracy, can we please — pretty please be allowed to vote on this," said town resident Jay Brenman, who was the first to sign the Web-based petition.

As it stands, the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools system and the Orange County Schools system could become a single, unified body if three of the five commissioners vote in favor of their combination.

The most recent talks regarding a merger began in January, in the midst of local government debates over the Schools Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance. The law, passed by all three area governments in July, places a moratorium on residential development if

home building begins to outpace school construction.

The idea of a merger arose during the SAPFO debate because officials thought the move might alleviate crowding. A Carrboro Planning Department report found a merger might delay the need for more schools for 10 to 15 years.

A merger also likely would shift money from schools in Chapel Hill and Carrboro to those in the county. Commissioner Moses Carey, who proposed the merger idea, said that because of its larger tax base and wealthier populace, Chapel Hill-Carrboro schools received \$12 million more per year in funding via its school district tax. The county school system has no district tax for its schools.

"The first thing (a merger) will do is come closer to equalizing funding," Carey said. "The county commissioners have the responsibility to care for every child in this county, no matter where they live."

But Kim Hoke, CHCCS spokeswoman, said that funding could be equalized without a merger. "There was a proposal for a district tax in Orange County, but the commis-

sioners decided not to pursue it."

Some parents, however, are concerned that officials are focusing on cost effectiveness at the expense of education. "The theme that keeps coming up is cost and whether we'll exceed the facilities ordinance," said Brenman, who has two children in CHCCS schools. "It's never about the quality of the education kids receive. 'The main beneficiary of (a merger) would be the developers.'"

Logistical and cultural issues, along with parents' concerns, also likely will factor into future merger discussions, Orange County Planning Director Craig Benedict said Friday. "It becomes a county-


wide mind-set against an urban versus rural mind-set."

Carey acknowledged that reshuffling district lines would pose a problem, but said the current situation leaves much to be desired. "What we're doing now is sending two school buses into the same neighborhood and taking some of the kids to different schools," he said. "That's not acceptable."

The board will present the county's study of the potential impacts of a merger at its Sept. 15 work session in Hillsborough.


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