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**HED:** Norman Public Schools include safety updates in upcoming bond election

One of the largest single budget items in the upcoming Norman school bond vote is for advancements in school safety and security.

The Feb. 14 vote includes \$353.9 million and nearly \$6 million for safety upgrades. Board members voted unanimously to present the proposal to district voters.

In school districts across the country, administrators are struggling to reach higher advancements in school safety.

Since the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting in December 2012, there have been 948 school shootings in the United States. Because of this, school districts such as Norman Public Schools have worked vigilantly in recent years to increase safety and security for the well-being of every student and faculty member, officials said.

In the school board meeting on Oct. 3, board member Dirk O'Hara mentioned that in a bond survey, the number one comment was safety and security.

"People are telling us to continue, and we want to continue," he said. "So that will no doubt be a number one theme of the bond again as it was in the last time."

When the bond was proposed in November, this was proven to be true. In the resolution, \$5,711,000 was budgeted to "acquire security improvements district-wide as funds allow." Though the resolution is unclear on what precisely these improvements will entail, associate

superintendent and chief operating officer Justin Milner gave some insight into the details of what these improvements will look like.

“Some of those are finalized, and then there are some structures out there and technology that we’re looking at, but we haven’t landed on it specifically,” he said.

Though Milner could not mention all of the advancements they are looking to make, he mentioned that some of it would include certain technology that will give students access to the high schools from certain access points.

Another issue that Milner mentioned was transportation safety. In addition to new technology on the buses themselves, the district is looking to improve the safety and security of their transportation facility despite the high level of recognition they have received already.

“We were fortunate enough to receive the Gold Standard Award by TSA,” said Milner, “which Norman is the first public school in the nation to receive such an award.”

The Gold Standard award is the highest award that can be given to a transit agency for achieving the highest scores possible in safety and security preparedness.

However, this award did not come easy, and Milner says that they will have to continue upgrading to maintain this recognition level.

“The facility needed that additional layer of support,” he said. “Making sure that we don’t allow unauthorized individuals on our transportation campuses as it relates to accessing our vehicles and buses. So, we are making sure we tighten up on that campus.”

In addition to upgrading to the facility, the buses have received technological advancements to keep the students as safe as possible. A significant advancement that has been added in recent years is a 360-degree camera system that ensures no blind spots on the bus.

Another measure of security for transportation that ensures parents can know where their kids are when being transported to and from school.

“We’ve put into the hands of our parents an app much like Uber or Lyft,” said Milner. “You can see when the bus comes within this geo-fence, so it gives notifications to the parents. So, a student wouldn’t necessarily have to stay right at the bus stop if it’s within close proximity.”

While transportation safety is one of the many things that will be focused on within the new bond, Milner also says that all aspects of security and safety need to be improved.

“You will forever, I would suspect, see safety and security on every bond issue unless some things change significantly in the world we live in,” Milner said. “You can’t ever allow yourself to become complacent or static with the current systems that you have.”

Milner and David Teuscher, Emergency Management Coordinator for the Norman Public School District, said one of the main safety concerns in today’s public school world is social media. With over 24 campuses, maintaining safety and security for over 14,000 students is a 24/7 job, and social media makes that job even harder.

“There’s a lot of things that go on on social media that, fortunately, a majority of the time are not accurate, but it drains our resources,” said Milner. “But you can’t afford to ignore one because maybe that is the one. So, it is every day, all day, 24/7.”

Teuscher says that the unknown pushes the drive to maintain advancements in security at each school.

“To me, it’s always the unknown,” he said. “You never know. Across the nation, you’ve heard on the TV, and somebody’s always doing something that you just look at and go, ‘I never would have thought that someone would do something like that.’”

Though attacks such as these are never expected, Teuscher said that the thing that scares him the most is the idea that they will miss some behavior that led to an attack like this.

“Whether it’s attacking an elementary school or Uvalde or something along those lines, you are worrying about the ones that... especially the ones that are planned, and they feel like, you feel like they had a plan,” said Teuscher.

One way that the administration has worked to keep an eye out for this behavior is the Watch D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students) program. This volunteer-based program encourages father figures to provide positive male role models in order to enhance school security and reduce bullying.

“Having their presence there is an added layer to have another adult set of eyes,” said Wes Moody, Executive Director of Communications, Community Relations and Public Information. “But it’s also having the dual purpose of, that’s a trusted adult who can be a positive influence to a student who may not have a positive role model in their life.”

Moody says that this not only helps increase safety, but it also helps build student morale and happiness.

“It’s someone who can greet them when they get off the bus and make them excited about being at school that day and make them feel good,” he said.

Because most attacks on schools are carried out by students who attended that school, the school district has worked to implement programs such as Watch D.O.G.S. that work to improve students’ mental health and take preventative action against attacks.

“We have had a long-standing policy that allowed for outside counseling to come in and serve the needs of our students,” said Milner.

Norman Public Schools have partnered with outside counselors and therapists to provide students with the ability to get the counseling they need to feel heard.

“We know that parents can take their kid to counseling outside the academic day,” said Milner. “That’s great. But we can’t let that be a barrier for those parents that can’t. To prevent letting that be a barrier to prevent them from getting counseling services.”

In addition to counseling services, the school has partnered with Crimes Stoppers to begin a campaign called “Hear Something, Say Something” to allow students and parents to report any threats, bullying, etc., with anonymity.

“That’s always for me is always the scary part of my job. Trying to, you know, make sure that we see something, we say something, and that’s a great partnership we have with our community, both interior and exterior,” Teuscher said.

The school administration has worked hard to spread this message to the schools to make sure that they hear every threat to school safety.

“We’ve put it on all the laptops we issue to students. We have posters throughout the hallway, making sure that they know, trying to support that they can submit, you know, anything. I mean, we don’t care. We’d rather know than to not know,” said Milner.

In addition to these programs, the school board hopes the upcoming bond vote will give them the money they need to increase security within the buildings.

“It’s our responsibility to protect our students, our staff, and our visitors altogether, and that’s a hard task, but it’s something we’re trying to hit head-on,” Teuscher said.