

Shamong School District prepares for \$5.4 million referendum in March



(file) Teacher Denise Geoghegan leads students at the Indian Mills Elementary School in Shamong during Diversity Day on Friday, Dec. 2, 2016.

SHAMONG — Voters will be heading to the polls on March 14 to decide on a \$5.4 million referendum project for the school district.

The money from the referendum will allow the district to install climate controls in the classrooms, gymnasium and cafeteria at the Indian Mills Memorial Middle School; improve safety and security features in both Indian Mills schools; and upgrade smaller items such as wells, according to a statement from school officials. "Like any home, our district facilities need periodic maintenance and improvements," a presentation from the December Board of Education meeting read.

The district said it conducted a "needs assessment" of facilities and concluded that the total amount of the projects would cost about \$5.4 million. School officials listed four reasons for tackling the projects now, including retiring debt from old projects and the state possibly paying up to 40 percent of the cost.

The average homeowner, with a property assessed at the township average of \$308,080, would pay an additional \$156.47 per year in school taxes if the referendum passes.

The highest-priced items include adding climate control to all classrooms for \$1.2 million, and upgrading the parking lot, walk and curb for about \$900,000. The district estimated all soft costs, such as architect fees, land surveying and legal expenses, at \$980,000. The climate controls will be a huge improvement for teachers and students, Business Administrator Laura Archer said.

"We have many students and staff that are adversely affected by extreme temperatures," Archer said in an email. "Many months during the school year, Indian Mills Memorial Middle School had inside temperatures near the high 80s, with many walls sweating due to the heat and humidity."

A large portion of the school's current debt will be paid off in May 2018, which will help keep the debt portion of the tax levy stable, she said.

The middle school currently serves as a "certified shelter reception and care annex" but with limited services, according to Archer. The upgrades will improve the facility in case it is needed for an emergency.

The school board is expected to receive monthly updates so residents can hear how the referendum project is progressing.

The district also plans to give a presentation to the Township Committee on Jan. 24.