

# Leasing plan just doesn't compute for school district



BY TIM SMITH  
STAFF WRITER

To lease or not to lease.

After careful scrutiny, the Farmington Public School District does not want to take the same road another district is taking when it comes to computers.

Instead of deciding to lease computers, which the Walled Lake school district has done with success, Farmington plans on buying them.

It's a matter of simple economics, according to Cheryl Cannon, Farmington's assistant superintendent for business and finance. To lease one computer for five years would cost \$2,558, "plus interest," estimated at 7.04 percent.

Cannon said the price for a new computer, according to one vendor, is about \$2,128.

Although more private businesses are leasing computers, Cannon stressed that they get tax breaks that public institutions such as school districts do not.

"We don't file tax returns, we're not a business," Cannon said. "So it's not a tax advantage for us to have a lease payment. Either we pay up front or lease the computers and pay interest."

"Since we already have the cash... it doesn't make sense for us to pay the interest."

In the Walled Lake district, which includes a small portion of Farmington Hills, about 200

multi-media computers were recently leased, at an annual cost of \$600 per unit.

"The leasing program for us is working very well," said Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum Bill Hamilton. "It affords us the opportunity to upgrade on a regular basis."

Hamilton added that if Walled Lake bought used computers for the same amount, "you may buy one that was two or three generations old."

Both Cannon and Hamilton agreed that there is no right or wrong way to address the leasing-versus-buying issue.

"I'm not going to knock their decision," Cannon said. "I'm not here to make Walled Lake look bad. I'm sure they have reasons for what they did."

According to Hamilton, "Each district has to look at its own situation and see what best suits them, to look at revenues and design a plan that fits."

And there might come a time when leasing is a better way to go for Farmington schools, said Superintendent Bob Maxfield.

Maxfield said the fact the district plans on taking five or six years to add 3,200 computers - enabling three or four per classroom - buys time to change opinions about leasing.

Although leasing computers is "costing you more per unit... that's not to say we could take advantage of it later on" if a better, more cost-effective leasing plan is designed, Maxfield said.

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backbone, is when we're doing a bond issue."

A significant chunk of the \$85 million Proposal I would help the district avoid hitting the communications wall. Jones said that is inevitable as things now stand, because of more teachers needing to become proficient on computers, and because more students rely on them for research.

Of Proposal I, \$3.6 million would fund fiber optic wiring, which Jones said is needed to expand the system's capacity and enhance its speed. "As we increase our usage, we also have to have access at higher speeds, as the material we're accessing is more multi-media oriented. So we're looking at what's the best way to do that."

Another \$4.7 million would buy electronic equipment needed to operate the communications system (video, data and telephone).

But the exclusion of computers in the current plan, probably cheered by some, might draw consternation from others. In March, the \$110 million plan included the purchase of new computers. This time, the proposal is stripped of the keyboards and monitors - which ultimately will be bought out of a capital projects fund.

About \$9.6 million will be spent from that fund for the first order of computers, to probably be bought in 1998. Superintendent Bob Maxfield said the district could take five or six years to buy the machines the March bond issue would have supplied.

Here's one apparent dilemma for voters. If they approve all of the infrastructure, without computers, how can the district put this splendid new wiring job to work?

According to Jones, fiber optics would speed up and improve the lines of communication between homes and schools, for direct parent-teacher communication; between the district's many buildings, now being handled by telephone lines leased from Ameritech.

Teachers who are being trained to use the computers could continue doing so without worry of the system crashing. And parents could leave voice-mail messages with teachers concerning absences, homework assignments or other concerns, rather than through the old "pink slips in the mailboxes" system, Jones said.

Fiber optics already are in

place in the Novi, Northville and Southfield school districts and were part of Walled Lake Consolidated School District's successful \$114 million bond issue last September.

According to Bill Hamilton, the Walled Lake administrator who spearheaded that district's technological plan, some 35 miles worth of fiber wiring will be installed during the calendar year 1998.

"We wanted to be able to implement our own voice and video (system) and run our telephone system internally, through our own fiber, so we wouldn't incur the costs" for intra-district communications.

"All internal (telephone) calls will be cost free as long as they are run through our own system," Hamilton said.

Results are "wonderful" in the Novi district, where a fiber optic system was part of a 1992 bond issue, said James Fry, director of technology.

"It works fantastic, it provides a connectivity between all buildings for voice, video and data," Fry said. "And it gives us tremendous growth potential in the future as new technologies evolve."

Convenience and cost savings are other pluses to having the system, Fry added. "We're sitting with our own fiber, so we don't have to deal with other providers."

Another question Farmington parents are expected to ask, Jones said, is linked to how instruction will be delivered after the computers are in place. At the top of the list is how can teachers ensure students are benefiting from having the modern technology in the classroom?

"They don't want to see computers going in just for the sake of computers," she said. "They want to see it as an integral part of the curriculum. They want to make sure (computers) aren't used for games, or instead of learning the basics."

Jones said parents can expect to receive letters from teachers, particularly in the elementary schools, detailing how the technology is being used and for what reasons.

"The letter (a parent) gets from the teacher on what they'll be doing next week on the computers really has an impact," Jones said.

Editor's note: On Thursday we'll take a look at the bond plan's impact on each building.

## Wings help fund fly high



STAFF PHOTOS BY JEFF KESSEL

Red and green: Detroit Red Wings Joey Kocur, at left on the tee, and Kris Draper, above buying a raffle ticket. They were joined by Darren McCarty, Chris Osgood and Matthew Dandenault who brought their Stanley Cup-winning celebrity to the Farmington Hills Police Benevolent Association Golf Outing Friday at the Links of Novi Golf Club. This year, 228 golfers for lunch and dinner, golf, auctions (with many Red Wing autographed items) and a raffle on a sunny afternoon.

The event also benefits Farmington Hills Firefighters, Farmington Public Safety and Franklin Public Safety this year. Hills Police Chief Bill Dwyer estimated they'll raise more than \$70,000 for the fund, which helps families of deceased officers.

"We get excellent community support because this community can relate to the cause," Dwyer said.



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