



Testimony Before the House Committee on Public Education

House Bill 134

by James Quintero, Director

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is James Quintero, and I am the director of the Think Local Liberty project at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today on [House Bill 134](#). I am here to testify in support of the bill.

As introduced, HB 134 would amend Section 45.003 of the Education Code to add the following:

(a-1) The governing board or commissioners court may not include more than one project or category of expenditure in any proposition submitted to authorize the issuance of bonds.

Although this may not seem like a big change at first, the proposed new law could actually lead to a significant improvement in ballot language transparency.

The current system of approving debt is oftentimes confusing and opaque. The proposition language put before voters is usually written in broad terms so as to include many different projects in the same question. This can make it difficult for voters to have a full and complete understanding of the proposition's purpose and projects.

As an example, consider the \$220 million proposition that McKinney ISD put before voters on May 7th, 2016. The official ballot language appeared as follows:

“The issuance of bonds in the amount of \$220,000,000 for the construction, renovation, acquisition, and equipment of school buildings and the purchases of necessary sites for school buildings and the levying of tax in the payment thereof.”

It is impossible to know from reading only that language that approving the proposition would authorize a \$50 million public expenditure on a [“multipurpose facility \[that\] would seat 12,000 fans and include approximately 2,400 dedicated parking spaces.”](#)

Tomball ISD offers another example. On November 7th, 2017, the district submitted the following proposition language to voters seeking their approval for a \$275 million bond.

“The issuance of \$275,000,000 school building bonds for the construction, acquisition, and equipment of school buildings in the district (including the rehabilitation, renovation, and improvement thereof), the purchase of the necessary sites for school buildings and the purchase of new school buses, and the levying of the tax in payment thereof.”

I suspect that at least some voters did not know that a portion of the bond proceeds were to be spent on a \$51.2 million stadium [“that provide\[d\] seating for up to 10,000 guests and includes 3,000 parking spaces.”](#)

Spring ISD provides yet another example. On November 8th, 2016, Spring ISD asked voters to approve the following \$330 million proposition:

“The issuance of \$330,000,000 of bonds for the construction, acquisition, and equipment of school buildings, including safety, security and technology improvements,

for the purchase of necessary sites for school buildings and for the purchase of school buses, and the levying of the tax in payment thereof.”

Some voters were, no doubt, aware that approving the proposition would mean funding a \$38 million high school stadium with seating capacity for 8,000 guests and situated on a “[117-acre parcel](#)” of land; however, many voters also probably didn’t know because it wasn’t specified in the passage above.

One final example. On May 10th, 2014, Frisco ISD asked voters to approve the following proposition seeking \$775 million in new debt. It read as follows:

“The issuance of \$775,000,000 of bonds by Frisco Independent School District for the acquisition, construction, and equipment of school buildings, including the purchase of new school buses, and the purchase of the necessary sites for school buildings and levying the tax in payment thereof, including the costs of any credit agreements executed in connection with the bonds.”

In this example, it’s worth noting not just the contents of the bond package, but also its size. At the time it was proposed, Frisco ISD’s \$775 million bond was believed to have ranked as the “[eighth-largest in state history](#).” Broadly speaking, it proposed to do the following:

- \$665.7 million to build 14 new schools and expand existing facilities;
- \$103.2 million to upgrade technology; purchase vehicles; replace and upgrade surveillance cameras and security devices; and pursue energy conservation measures; and
- \$6.1 million to upgrade and renovate school stadiums.

In each instance above, voters approved the bond propositions put before them. But it remains unclear as to whether they were well-informed of the proposition’s particulars.

The examples above are not isolated events. Every year, Texas voters are asked to approve several billion dollars in new debt. This makes it critical that the Legislature ensure that the public is knowledgeable and well-informed on the propositions that they are being asked to decide.

By requiring school districts to offer separate ballot propositions, parsed according to either project size or category of expense, lawmakers can help significantly improve ballot language transparency. In turn, that will put voters in a better position to decide which public expenditures are in their best interest and which are not.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have. ★



James Quintero is the director of the Think Local Liberty project at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. He’s been featured in the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, the *Huffington Post*, Fox News, and Breitbart.

Since joining the Foundation in 2008, Quintero has focused his research efforts on state and local government spending, debt, taxes, financial transparency, annexation, and pension reform. Quintero received a bachelor’s degree from the University of Texas at Austin and an M.P.A. with an emphasis in public finance from Texas State University.

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