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3 county bonds each pass by wide margins

By Carolyn Rickard

Durham County, get your construction hats ready.

Three county bonds passed by overwhelming margins Tuesday, with roughly three-quarters of voters approving the projects.

Close to 80 percent of Durham County voters said yes to \$194.2 million in bonds to repair old schools and build new ones. More than 75 percent approved \$8.68 million to upgrade and expand Durham Tech, and nearly 70 percent approved \$4.18 million in bonds for the N.C. Museum of Life & Science, according to preliminary results Tuesday night.

With all but provisional and one-stop votes counted, 27,174 people said yes to the school bonds -- 77 percent. With surveys earlier this year showing just half of voters approving that bond, some officials were surprised Tuesday night at the percentage of voters supporting it.

The results showed that 25,960 -- or 76 percent -- of voters approved the Durham Tech bond, and 24,048 -- or 69 percent -- approved the museum bond. "The first thing is to thank the taxpayers for their trust in the county," said Barry Van Deman, president and chief executive officer of the museum's board of directors. "Our mission is to educate people of all ages, and we are going to strive to continue to do that."

The school portion of the bond will provide for two new elementary schools, a middle school and a high school. Neal Middle School will receive \$13.7 million in renovations, while R.N. Harris, Parkwood and Y.E. Smith elementary schools will get close to \$8 million each. Durham School of the Arts will get \$15 million in renovations and additions and several other buildings will get between \$400,000 and \$6 million each.

At Durham Tech, the 30-year-old Newton Building will receive upgrades to its electrical and mechanical systems, along with a roof and walkway. Some \$5 million in other campus improvements also will occur.

The museum, meanwhile, will get upgrades to visitor facilities, including restrooms, along with technological and infrastructure improvements.

The bonds will be issued in three phases, with the projects worked on over the next decade.

Bill Ingram, incoming president Durham Tech, said he was "thrilled and delighted."

"It's a real indication that Durham comes together for education," Ingram said.