

# Hallowell voters heading to polls Friday for \$2.36 million bond vote

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[Local & State](#)

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The controversial bond package includes money for the Stevens Commons redevelopment project, and signs around the city are urging people to get out and vote.

By [Jason Pafundi](#) Staff Writer

This photo taken on Saturday shows that some Second Street neighbors have differing opinions on the Hallowell bond vote.

HALLOWELL — Homemade and printed signs around the city, from Water and Second streets to Vaughan and Town Farm roads, urge people to vote ‘yes’ or vote ‘no.’ But for Hallowell residents, the decision to support or oppose a \$2.36 million bond package during a special referendum election Friday isn’t that simple.

The [package](#), if approved, will help shape life and business in Hallowell for future generations. There is money to help reconstruct Water Street, to increase parking downtown options, and to reclaim roads on the other side of Interstate 95, as well as some dollars to fix the city’s dilapidated fire station tower.

The City Council chose to bundle six components into one controversial package — \$625,000 for a Water Street reconstruction project, \$600,000 for infrastructure improvements at Stevens Commons, \$535,000 for rural Hallowell road maintenance, \$300,000 to improve parking in downtown, \$220,000 to restore the fire station’s historic tower and \$80,000 for city building maintenance. Councilor George LaPointe, chairman of the finance committee, said one bond was chosen because “the various components of the bond fit together to support the economic vitality and development of Hallowell.”

But not everybody sees it that way, and, in fact, there is at least one person who said he’d vote in favor of each component if there were separate questions, but he’s voting no because the components were bundled.

“I feel like we’re being forced to eat our liver to get the apple pie,” Hallowell resident Tim Guiggey said. “(The council) wanted to get the Stevens Commons thing passed, so they combined it with Water Street and some other things. I’m not voting ‘yes,’ because I don’t like the way the politicians did it. Two of my neighbors are voting ‘no’ for the same reason.”

The funding for road and sidewalk improvements at [Stevens Commons](#), the 54-acre complex just off Winthrop Street that was acquired by developer Matt Morrill a year ago, has been the most controversial piece of the bond package. Ken Young has been the most vocal opponent.

During several public meetings, and also in a few interviews, Young has said he opposes the bond largely because of the way it was assembled.

“People want the ability to vote on these questions on an individual basis, because then you can exercise individual judgment,” Young said. “A single question puts the whole package at risk of a negative vote.”

Malley Weber, who owns Hallowell Clay Works on Water Street, said she supports the bundling because each component is an investment in the city.

“I think we need to invest in the city because that’s how you move things forward,” she said. “I think we need all those components, and I don’t have a concern about it being bundled.”

Weber said her social circle consists mostly of like-minded people who share a lot of the same views on many issues, but in this case, there’s a definite divide.

“My neighbor has a big ‘no’ sign and I have a ‘yes,’” she said. “It’s really split among friends, and it’s interesting.”

Russell Lester, a server at the Quarry Tap Room, however, said he sees his social network as being largely in favor of the bond package. He said he definitely hears people talking about the bond at the restaurant and on social media.

“It seems to me that the consensus is that people are for it, but maybe the ‘yes’ voters are just more vocal,” Lester said. “The biggest thing from people against it is that all the questions are lumped into one bond, but I personally don’t have a problem with the bundle.”

Lester said he has a different viewpoint than others because he isn’t a business owner or homeowner and doesn’t have to pay property taxes. The bond, with an estimated \$795,000 in interest, will be paid in annual installments for up to 20 years and would cost the city \$3.155 million in total at maturity.

“I don’t have as much hinging on this as other people do,” Lester said.

Since last summer, there have been public meetings, hearings and letters and opinion pieces. The City Council spent money and sent out a mailer urging people to support the bond, while a separate post card went out asking people to vote against it.

The most controversial component, the one bringing about the most public discussion, has been money earmarked for the Stevens Commons redevelopment project. Morrill, of Grand View Log and Timber Frames, in Winthrop, has a vision of a mixed-use development featuring affordable senior housing, commercial space and small subdivisions on the property.

In the year since he’s purchased the campus from the state, Morrill has done a number of below-the-surface infrastructure improvements, found six tenants to lease office space in the Baker Building, secured a commitment from Community Housing of Maine to convert the Central Building into [senior housing units](#) and reached a deal with the city to locate a new fire station on the site of the Farwell Building. He has said several times that he’s invested more already than he’s asking for from the city, but he said the infrastructure improvements are needed for the redevelopment to take the next step.

“(Those) improvements are the foundation of this whole project,” Morrill said. “It paints a nice starting point for other people to participate, and it’s already a real project with real tenants.”

Weber is especially supportive of the Stevens Commons component because she thinks the property presents a lot of opportunities for the herself and the city.

“I was looking at space at Stevens Commons for my own business,” she said. “I think Matt is a wonderful guy with great intentions, and I think that property could make an amazing art space.”

Young thinks the redevelopment of Stevens Commons is a good idea but doesn’t like how the city takes a risk by

spending \$600,000 up front without any guarantee to see a return on its investment.

“Once the city’s money is in, it has no other option but to wait passively, potentially for a very long time, and hope for the best,” he said.

Other opponents have claimed, incorrectly, that the bond presents a \$600,000 gift of public money given to a private developer, though Morrill has said repeatedly that he won’t see any of the money from the bond — it would go straight to a contractor.

Voting will take place from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday at Hall-Dale Elementary School. City Clerk Dianne Polky will have a crew to help hand-count the ballots, and City Manager Nate Rudy said he hopes to have results before 10 p.m.

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