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Sun Prairie Area School District

Sun Prairie School Board approves referendum question on November ballot

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Frei



Schroeder



Diana McFarland

The Sun Prairie Area School District (SPASD) Board passed an unanimous vote 1 a \$9 million referendum to the Nov. 8 Ballot at the Aug. 8 meeting.

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Phil Frei, SPASD Director of Business and Finance, provided the framework for the \$9 million referendum: \$3 million each year over the next three years until a \$9 million cumulative total is reached.

Frei said others and he are concerned about the lack of state funding for public schools, because there's been a 0% increase in Wisconsin per-pupil funding during the past two years.

Frei referred to a graph in his presentation that shows Wisconsin's per-pupil education spending has increased 48.6% since 2002, while the national average has increased by 75.2% during the same period.

And, Frei pointed out, that's not including the two most recent years in which the state fell further behind in education funding.

"I'm comfortable with next year and the year after, but we want people to know there are still unknowns in that third year how the referendum will play out," Frei said.

Janet Rosseter, SPASD Assistant Superintendent of Operations, agreed and said that if the state continues to not increase public school funding, the \$9 million referendum won't be enough.

School Board President Steve Schroeder advised the board that work needs to be done before the November election.

"70% of Sun Prairie doesn't have kids in the school district," Schroeder said. "People on fixed incomes are struggling as well. I don't see this as a slam dunk. I think we are going to work hard to get this to pass."

Frei reiterated the importance of the referendum passing in order to achieve the six goals in his presentation:

- Maintain class sizes, so that individualized student needs can best be met;
- Competitive employee wage and benefit plans so that student needs are met with a best of class workforce;
- Equity in learning environments, so that buildings are updated to provide spaces supporting 21st Century teaching;
- Maintain student services programming, so that counselors, social workers, nurses and special education teachers are able to meet student needs;
- Consistency in classroom experience: when the regular teacher is out, invest in high quality professional substitutes; and
- An increase in mental health services for students, allowing the district to have capacity to respond to increasing student needs.

Regardless of whether or not the referendum passes, the school-purpose mill rate is expected to decrease due to more property owners moving into the area to divide the taxes up.

Frei's calculations showed the current mill rate of \$11.61 projected to drop to \$11.36 for the 2022-23 year. This equates to spending \$250 less per \$100,000 in property value in the 2022-23 year compared to the current year.

The district appreciates the continued support from the community to be able to fund the district in recent years where the state funding has lacked.

"This community has given a ton," Sun Prairie Area School Superintendent Brad Saron said. "The quality of schools we have attracts families."

SPASD Board Deputy Clerk Diana McFarland said she is concerned with portraying the correct messaging to the community with the goals stated.

“Education is an investment and the community invests in the way they want to,” McFarland said.

In order to meet the deficit without a referendum, the district would need to cut 7% of the current operating budget.

Frei estimated that 91 staff positions would have to be cut in order to balance the district’s deficit budget if the referendum is rejected by district voters.

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