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**Over $1.1 billion on the ballot in Wisconsin school referendums**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Wisconsinites this November will be deciding on more than $1.1 billion in K-12 school referendums across the state, a total that, when combined with ballot measures in April, puts more school money on the ballot this year than any other single year this century.

A WisPolitics.com review of school referendum numbers kept by the Department of Public Instruction found that, combined with all referendums from the spring election ballot, Wisconsin voters this year will have weighed in on school spending issues totaling nearly $3 billion.

That approaches the $3.4 billion school districts asked for in 2019 and 2018 combined.

Voters have decided on more than $1 billion in referendums every single year since 2014. And over the last 20 years, only in 2009 were schools collectively asking for anything less than $500 million.

Since the 1993-94 school year, state law has limited school districts’ ability to raise tax levies without a referendum. And an April report by the Wisconsin Policy Forum found inflation over the last decade has outpaced increases in per-pupil aid to students in the state, both with state funding and property tax levies.

Of the total on the ballot this fall, $1.1 billion is for issuing debt and non-recurring purposes, typically for renovations, construction projects or just to keep up school services as costs rise. The remaining $46.8 million would go to what are called recurring referendums, permanently raising a district’s levy limit by the stated amount.

State Rep. Sondy Pope, D-Mt. Horeb, told WisPolitics.com the record amount on the ballot this year is a sign the state Legislature “failed its obligations” to help cover school expenses and deliver an equal, quality education for all Wisconsin students.

She said one of the problems is because the state mandates certain school programs like special education to districts, but then doesn’t adequately reimburse the schools for the costs of the mandate.

“Somebody has got to pay that,” said Pope, the ranking Democrat on the Assembly Education Committee. “It’s understandable, but it’s really desperate, isn’t it? ”

The latest biennial budget did increase state funding for K-12 education, but Pope said it wasn’t enough when factoring in districts’ mandated costs.

Pope added she felt the $3 billion on ballots this year highlights inequities in the education system, leaving a quality education for students “almost like a lottery” up to local residents’ sentiments for how much they can afford to support the school.

Madison Metropolitan School District schools have the most money on the line this cycle at a total of $350 million.

The district’s residents have two different non-recurring referendums to decide on in voting this fall: $317 million to renovate the city’s four high schools and construct a new school building; and another $33 million spread through 2023 to help cover school maintenance and operational costs.

Madison’s $317 million construction request is the second-highest referendum from any school district in the last 20 years. The district is only behind Racine Unified School District’s request in April to raise $1.1 billion through 2051 to modernize buildings and improve student programs, which voters approved by only a five-vote margin.

Dan Rossmiller, government relations director for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, told WisPolitics.com there are many factors contributing to a hike in referendum amounts this year.

He agreed with Pope and the WPF report that state lawmakers in recent years haven’t kept up with inflation and rising costs for schools. He also said part of the reason districts are requesting hundreds of millions in construction and renovation projects is because interest rates for projects are at historic lows, and also because many school buildings are outdated and largely unimproved since first going up decades ago.

He said he remembers attending one of Madison’s high schools when it was considered one of the new and modern buildings, around 50 years ago.

Rossmiller suggested as state aid fell behind inflation over the past decade, districts under a budget crunch opted to keep student services over building maintenance or renovations.

“You can only patch a roof for so long before you have to spend big bucks to completely replace the roof,” he said. “And with unemployment relatively high and interest rates relatively low, this may be an economical time for districts to undertake those building projects.”

He called the ongoing economic recession a “double-edged sword,” because struggling residents might be more reluctant to raise their taxes but there is also an opportunity to get “more value” out of each tax dollar spent.

Oshkosh Area School District has the second-highest dollar figure for voters to decide on this fall at nearly $170.6 million.

This number is also split between two different non-recurring referendums: a $107 million request to upgrade infrastructure and build a new middle school and elementary school, and a request for an additional $63.6 million through 2030 to maintain school services.

Dave Gundlach, Oshkosh’s deputy superintendent, told WisPolitics.com the $63.6 million request would extend two previous non-recurring referendums in order to keep programs like the district’s one-to-one initiative, giving each student a personal laptop for learning.

He added that services like the initiative have proved essential for teaching students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We could not be educating our students without it,” he said.

Oshkosh in late September moved all its schools online for two weeks after discovering a number of positive cases among students.

Gundlach also said he felt confident his district’s referendums will pass, as he’s mostly heard “good feedback” from locals that the schools are properly handling taxpayer dollars.

But with Oshkosh’s finances on the ballot alongside a heated presidential race, Gundlach said he’s worried the district’s needs could be drowned out by the all-encompassing and bitterly divisive campaign at the top of the ticket.

“Our biggest challenge has been getting our word out and cutting through the noise so that people can actually think about it, get some information, ask their questions and realize we’re on the ballot as well,” he said.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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