**April 2 school issues total $1.4 billion**

By WisPolitics.com

Once again, voters across the state will be asked to sign off on school ballot issues to pay for buildings, renovations, maintenance and operational costs.

The total on April 2: $1.4 billion.

That is the third-highest amount districts have requested in a single election since 2000, according to data provided to WisPolitics by the Wisconsin Policy Forum. The most districts have asked for overall in a single election since 2000 was the more than $2 billion districts requested in November 2022. Voters approved $1.7 billion of that request.

In the 2023 April election, voters approved $637.6 million of the $1.2 billion districts requested.

Overall, school districts have placed 91 referendums on the April 2 ballot. The biggest request is $252 million for Milwaukee Public Schools, which is more than the other top two asks combined. The MPS proposal has spurred organized opposition from the Milwaukee business community, and support from some top elected officials also on the spring ballot.

MPS has said the money would help address a $200 million budget shortfall in the coming school year due to a lack of state funding. The district says that money would help maintain smaller class sizes, keep art, music, library and physical education programming, and retain teachers.

The district in a fact sheet on the proposal cites high inflation and per-pupil funding freezes in 2021 and 2022. Gov. Tony Evers approved a $325 annual increase in the per-pupil spending limit in his most recent budget as part of a deal the Democratic governor made with Republicans on shared revenue and boosting private school vouchers.

“Enough is Enough,” a group backed by the Metropolitan Milwaukee Chamber of Commerce, launched an ad campaign this week urging voters to oppose the referendum over cost to taxpayers.

MMAC President Dale Kooyenga has said the costs will put the city’s growth “in serious jeopardy” and undermine residents’ ability to pay for housing.

“This referendum is being brought forward less than five years after passage of an $87 million revenue limit increase without a clear plan on how to improve educational outcomes, even as academic performance continues to be at or near the bottom of all major school districts,”
Kooyenga wrote in a letter to MMAC members. “We cannot continue to perpetuate the same strategies and expect different outcomes.”

Meanwhile, Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson and Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley announced their support for the effort last month.

“School districts around the state are utilizing referendums to give their students the opportunities they deserve, and Milwaukee students shouldn’t be left behind,” Johnson said in a statement.

The district has launched a “Vote Yes for MPS” campaign in support of the referendum.

A $100,000 home would see a tax hike of $216 in the first year under the plan, according to the referendum fact sheet. The cost would be $325 for a $150,000 property or $431 for a $200,000 property in the first year.

The referendum proposes investments of:

$140 million for the 2024-25 school year;
$51 million for the 2025-26 school year;
$47 million for the 2026-27 school year; and
$14 million in the 2027-28 school year.

The New Richmond School District, which is asking for the second-highest amount, is requesting $113.7 million to fund additions, maintenance needs and renovations at Starr Elementary, Paperjack Elementary and New Richmond Middle School. The schools were built in 1965, 1991 and 1959, respectively.

The district in part aims to use the money to address enrollment, which has gone up nearly 10% over the past 10 years, according to a district web page with information on the ballot question.

New Richmond Superintendent Troy Miller told WisPolitics the money will help support students and staff and make sure students have appropriate learning environments.

“We have teachers, you know, teaching in hallways and storage closets and unique places very creatively, but we can’t keep continuing that.… We’ve been doing a lot of work, we had a great process and the community involvement getting us here to help us problem-solve,” Miller said.

Although Miller said “no one wants their taxes raised,” he added “everywhere I’ve gone, everyone completely understands the needs.”

The third-highest ask is for $102.3 million for the Mukwonago School District to build a new middle school, demolish Park View Middle School and renovate elementary schools to create spaces for
four-year-old kindergarten.

The money would be used for renovations and improvements at Big Bend Elementary School, renovations at Clarendon Avenue, Prairie View, Rolling Hills and Section Elementary Schools, as well as for district-wide maintenance, infrastructure and site improvement needs.

Mukwonago Superintendent Joe Koch told WisPolitics the proposal is part of the second phase of facility improvements after voters approved a referendum in 2016 to provide funding for renovations and additions to Mukwonago High School.

Koch said a new middle school building would enhance educational opportunities for students.

“We also have the need, and we hear it from our families, to have four-year-old kindergarten as (an) option in all of our elementary schools to provide both full-day and half-day options for our
families, which is what we are aiming to do,” Koch said.

He said he hopes the referendum is approved, noting a survey the district conducted found 63% of 3,160 respondents said they would definitely or probably support it.

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