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Jefferson School Board sets Nov. 5 ballot operational referendum

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF JEFFERSON

Aug 14, 2024

JEFFERSON — At its Monday meeting, the Jefferson School Board voted to place an operational referendum question on the ballot for Tuesday, Nov. 5.

If voters approve the operational referendum, the district will be able to exceed its state-imposed revenue limit by \$1.4 million per year over the next four years. The referendum would then expire unless voters approved a new referendum. This differs from the capital referendum that was passed in 2022, which approved funds for building projects throughout the District.

The funding provided through the proposed referendum would help the district avoid significant cuts to programs, services, and staffing. The district's top priorities would be maintaining comprehensive educational and co-curricular programs, including elementary reading, behavioral and mental health resources for students, school safety and technology infrastructure, and sustaining student-to-staff ratios.

Like all Wisconsin districts, the School District of Jefferson has a state-imposed revenue limit based on a formula established in 1993.

This outdated formula, paired with minimal state aid for public schools in recent years, has led many districts to seek local support through operational referendums.

Over the last decade, more than half of Wisconsin districts have received similar approval from voters. As it turns out, the realities of the state funding formula, rising costs and dwindling financial support for public education from the state legislature in recent years mean we must turn more toward our local community for the funding we need.

As a district, we have maintained financial discipline and have been responsible for the money our taxpayers have invested in their local schools. The School District of Jefferson has already made significant cuts to balance the budget, including over \$675,000 in staffing alone over the past year.

Without the additional levy authority from an operational referendum, the district will be forced to make further budget adjustments in 2025, significantly affecting programs and services for students.

This may mean increased class sizes, more staff reductions, cuts to or elimination of elective offerings & co-curricular programs, decreased behavioral and mental health resources for students, further reducing budget allocations and constraints on recruiting and retaining quality employees.

All of these factors would hinder the District's capacity to maintain the exceptional schools that have become a point of pride for our entire community.

With an approved referendum on November 5, conservative estimates point to a mill rate of \$9.05. Last year's mill rate was \$9.04. If approved, residents would see a projected property tax increase of \$0.01 for every \$1,000 of assessed property value. Both mill rates are the lowest in the last 10 years.

The increased school levy tax credit (SLTC) will help offset some of this impact. Residents can find that amount listed on their tax bills.

The district is committed to keeping the community informed and engaged throughout this process. A dedicated webpage will soon be launched, providing answers to frequently asked questions about the referendum.

Superintendent Charles Urness will also host several “Coffee with Charlie” and “Lunch and Learn” educational events in the community, offering residents the opportunity to ask questions and gain a deeper understanding of why the referendum is on the ballot.

Election Day is set for Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2024. We encourage all residents to participate in this important decision that will shape the future of our schools and students.