

Wausau Daily Herald 01/30/2015, Page A03
Explaining Wausau schools referendum

After four years of study, the Wausau School Board on Jan. 12 unanimously approved two referendum questions for the April election. The first is a “bond” referendum, seeking \$29.6 million. The majority is designated for elementary schools. The plan includes closing the aging A.C. Kiefer building, which currently serves early childhood and 4-year-old kindergarten students. Our 4-K professionals recommend transitioning to regional centers at four elementary schools: Riverview, Hawthorn Hills, G.D. Jones and Thomas Jefferson. The plan achieves educational benefits desired by our 4-K professionals as well as cost savings from closing the Kiefer building.

The bond plan also adds kindergarten- through fifth-grade space at Jefferson and Jones. This addresses overcrowding and moves two schools toward an optimal size, making them more efficient and increasing educational opportunities. The additions will also lessen necessary boundary changes.

Approximately \$6 million of the construction plan includes expansion of the manufacturing/automotive facilities at our high schools. Expanding and enhancing curriculum in these areas has received significant community support. Developing student employability skills is a high priority.

Finally, the bond plan includes about \$4 million for deferred maintenance. While a relatively small percentage of the total, it will address significant maintenance projects. It is an important investment in our facilities. The second question is an “operational” referendum. It seeks \$2 million annually for five years to complete a technology plan. The Board authorized it as a “nonrecurring” operational referendum. By law the funding ends after five years at a total of \$10 million. The plan is wide in scope and includes everything from replacement of aging servers to devices for students to the telephone system.

We previously developed a community survey administered by School Perceptions LLC. It was sent to all district registered voters and we received thousands of responses. It served a dual purpose of informing the Board and providing information to those who completed it.

The survey included tax impact estimates that were intentionally conservative. Collecting survey responses for a project that later turned out to have a significantly higher tax impact than what was projected in the survey would not have been useful in evaluating community support. While tax impact is only one of many factors most voters will consider, it is an important factor.

When the Board unanimously approved the two referendum questions, the tax impacts referenced were from the prior community survey. After approval, the District worked with PMA Securities, an independent third-party financial advisor, to calculate more accurate figures.

The updated figures were previewed Jan. 16 and were formally presented to the Board on Jan. 26.

According to PMA Securities, approval of the \$29.6 million bond question would have a tax impact of \$12 annually (or \$1 per month) for every \$100,000 of home value. The operational question of \$2 million per year for five years would result in a tax impact of \$21 annually (or \$1.75 per month).

Some might wonder why the smaller operational question appears to have a greater tax impact than the bond question. It is because the tax impact of the operational question is limited to five years. The bond question is spread over 20 years.

We understand it's important to provide the information the Board members used to reach our unanimous conclusion that both referendum questions are in the best interest of the district and the community. Any local community groups hoping to learn more are encouraged to contact the district to arrange for a meeting or to receive information. Similarly, any individual seeking information is encouraged to contact us as well.

Lance Trollop is the president of the Wausau School Board. Contact him at ltrollop@wausauschools.org.

