

# ‘Dark store’ referendums receive widespread support

Posted on Wednesday, Nov 7, 2018

Voters in more than 20 counties, cities and villages across the state threw their support behind referendums to urge lawmakers to pass legislation closing the so-called “dark store” loophole.

The measures received widespread support. The narrowest margin — 19.5 percent — came from Jefferson County, where around 60 percent of respondents there voted to back legislation on the topic, while 40 percent opposed it.

The biggest margin of victory came from Dane County, where 91.8 percent of voters backed legislation and only 8.2 percent didn’t — a margin of 83.6 percent.

The advisory referendums — from two villages, four cities and 17 counties across the state — came after lawmakers earlier this session debated legislation to prevent stores from basing their property value off of vacant properties or “dark stores,” which have lower property value and can be taxed less. Two bills on the issue each failed to clear the Legislature, including a last-ditch effort in the Assembly to amend a bill to include language on the topic.

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The ballot asks followed a campaign from the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, Wisconsin Counties Association and Wisconsin Towns Association against the so-called loophole, which included a “call to action” component for local governments to pass resolutions this fall.

Wisconsin Counties Association Executive Director Mark O’Connell touted the widespread support in a news release, saying the results “show that this is a common-sense issue.”

“The voters have spoken and now we encourage the Governor-elect and the legislature to take up this issue and close the dark store loopholes,” he said. “This is a tax shift, mainly to homeowners, and we encourage our state officials to act in January.”

But Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce Director of Tax, Transportation and Legal Affairs Cory Fish countered in a statement the results “proved nothing more than the fact that municipalities and counties have a talent for writing biased and factually inaccurate questions for the ballot.”

“The so-called ‘dark stores’ loophole is a myth,” he said. “In reality, the tax shift is from homeowners to businesses, and these proposals would simply legalize the unlawful actions of overly aggressive assessors who are looking to increase taxes on businesses of all sizes in their communities.”