

Voters to decide on \$1.26B in school referendums

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School referendums on the spring ballot in local elections tomorrow total \$1.26 billion in requests for infrastructure upgrades, construction of new facilities and funds for operating expenses.

The biggest ask comes from the West Allis-West Milwaukee School District, which is requesting voters approve \$150 million for a project that would consolidate the district's two high schools into one facility. District spokeswoman Amanda Stewart told WisPolitics.com the older buildings are too costly to maintain and offer far more space than needed.

Stewart added declining enrollment has added to the issue. That new school would consist of existing facilities at Nathan Hale as well as several building additions and renovations. If approved, the project is slated to conclude in the 2026-27 school year, Stewart said.

The Wausau School District is the only other district asking for more than \$100 million.

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The northern Wisconsin district is requesting voters approve an ask to borrow \$120 million to remodel all of its middle and high schools, expand several schools and construct a new School Forest Environmental Learning Center.

Rounding out the top five largest asks are:

*Nicolet University High School in Glendale, asking for \$77.4 million in general obligation bonds;

*Fox Point School District, asking for \$58.5 million to build a new Bayside Middle School and renovate the Stormonth Elementary School; and

*Oconto Falls School District, asking for \$49.9 million to construct a new middle school, and for improvements to the high school and elementary schools, and addressing deferred maintenance.

Other districts are requesting non-recurring budget increases over the next several school years.

Lodi School District in central Wisconsin is asking for \$5.98 million more each year for the next five years.

District Administrator Vincent Breunig told WisPolitics.com the funds would be split to cover either increased operations or maintenance costs.

\$3.85 million would be for staffing, salaries, adding new staff positions, IT staff, increasing salaries, retirement benefits, covering inflation and other operational costs.

The remaining \$2.13 million would be for maintenance and technology upgrades. Breunig said the district needs to replace the roofs on its high school and elementary school.

He added Lodi had no choice but to go to referendum as increasing costs have raised concerns about how to keep the school in good operating condition.

"There's a lot of talk of a funding cliff for districts," he said. "Like, where is this extra money going to come from for supporting staff?"

Sturgeon Bay School District is seeking approval of a non-recurring referendum that would give the school incrementally more money over the next five years. In all, the referendum would give the district \$16.1 million.

Sturgeon Bay School District Business Manager Jacob Holtz said that money would cover general budgetary costs and allow the district to keep attracting and retaining the same quality of teachers as they currently have.

He added inflation increases coupled with the Legislature's failure to allow increased revenue limits are driving the increase in referendum asks. Without increased revenue, schools are forced to come up with ways to compensate for rising costs while offering the same quality of education as before inflation spiked, he said.

"That's a tough pill to swallow anyway you slice it," Holtz said.

Other top referendums with sunsets include:

- *River Valley School District asking \$10.9 million over the next three years;
- *Merrill Area School District asking for \$10 million over the next four years; and
- *Tomahawk School District asking for \$9.8 million over the next three years.

See the list of referendums:

<https://sfs.dpi.wi.gov/Referenda/CustomReporting.aspx>

Other local referendums

In addition to the school referendums, communities will vote on questions about clean water, new community buildings, recreation trails, legalizing marijuana and local levy increases.

Several of the increases would provide funds for law enforcement and emergency services including:

- *A \$769,335 yearly increase in Fort Atkinson to hire six full-time "firefighter/advanced emergency medical technicians," six full-time "firefighter/paramedics" and two police officers;
- *A \$229,895 yearly increase in Seymour to provide fire and rescue services;
- *A \$200,000 yearly increase in Washburn for two full-time EMTs and to provide funds for "paid on-call EMTs" and police wages; and
- *A \$140,000 yearly increase in the Village of Butler for an additional police officer.

Both Eau Claire County and La Crosse County will vote on an advisory referendum to establish the right to clean water. The question voters will answer is: "Should the State of Wisconsin establish a right to clean water to protect the following: human health, the environment, and the diverse cultural and natural heritage of Wisconsin?"

Both counties have been affected by PFAS contamination. Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances are a series of chemicals found in industrial and everyday products, most notably firefighting foam. They do not break down easily in the environment and are linked to several diseases and cancers in humans.

Johnson Bridgewater, River Alliance of Wisconsin water advocates organizer, said voters must vote yes to send a message to state leaders that prioritizing clean

water is an issue voters agree on across partisan lines.

In 2021, the city of Eau Claire — located in Eau Claire and Chippewa counties — had to shut down several wells where PFAS levels exceeded groundwater standards. PFAS have been detected in municipal wells, private drinking water and groundwater on French Island in the Town of Campbell in La Crosse County.

“Voting YES to the question is a way for voters to show they care about protecting clean drinking water from threats like nitrate, lead, and PFAS contamination,” Bridgewater said in a statement. “Wisconsin just isn’t Wisconsin without the clean water resources that are essential to healthy families and our healthy economy.”

Referendums in three Dane and Jefferson County municipalities ask whether they should borrow funds to expand and remodel the existing Cambridge Community Fire and EMS District building. The referendums also asks if municipalities should use the funds to acquire an acre of land at 275 W. Main Street in Cambridge for the project.

The referendums ask to borrow:

- *a maximum of \$1.64 million in the Village of Cambridge, Dane and Jefferson Counties;
- *a maximum of \$3.14 million in the Town of Oakland, Jefferson County; and
- *a maximum of \$1.28 in the Town of Christiana, Dane County.

According to the Cambridge Fire Department’s website, plans for the renovation started in 2015. Cambridge Fire Chief Terry Johnson told WisPolitics.com the renovation would improve safety and response times.

Johnson said the department asked for a renovation in a referendum last spring, but it was rejected. This year, the cost was cut by \$1.4 million and the square footage reduced from 28,000 square feet to 23,000 square feet. Johnson said the renovation would take about a year and a half.

A referendum in Ashland would gauge voters’ opinions on legalizing cannabis, giving voters three separate choices.

The question asks if cannabis should: be legal for those 21 and older for recreational or medical use and be taxed and regulated like alcohol with “proceeds from the taxes used for education, healthcare, addiction recovery services and

infrastructure”; “be legal for medical purposes only and available by prescription through a medical dispensary”; or “remain a criminally illegal drug as provided under current law.”

Ashland Ald. Eric Lindell, who worked to get the referendum on the ballot, told WisPolitics.com it is important to put pressure on the state Legislature to legalize.

“I think it’s important to bring pressure to bear on the state Legislature and let them know that it’s high time Wisconsin joins a lot of the other states that are legalizing marijuana,” Lindell said.

Lindell said it doesn’t make sense to keep marijuana illegal when revenue could be used to fund a variety of programs. He said he believes there is support for legalization of at least medical cannabis, though he hopes the full legalization option will win out in the referendum.

A March Marquette University Law poll found that 61 percent of 802 Wisconsinites surveyed said they approved of legalizing marijuana.

Residents of the Town of Red Springs in Shawano County will vote on whether to adopt a resolution to pass an amendment to the U.S. Constitution stating that corporations, unions, non-profits and other entities do not have constitutional rights. The amendment also states that money is not speech and limiting political contributions and spending is not limiting speech.

Seven referendums will address whether ATVs and UTVs should be allowed on roads. There are 22 referendums to move town clerks or treasurers from elected to appointed positions.

A WisPolitics.com review of fall election referendums in 2020 found that towns were seeking to make the change to appointed positions due to a lack of interested and qualified candidates in rural areas.

According to the Wisconsin Towns Association, there are 280 appointed clerks, 201 appointed treasurers and 153 appointed clerk treasurers across the state.

See the list of referendums:

<https://elections.wi.gov/sites/elections/files/2022-03/2022%20%20Spring%20Election%20Referendum%20031522.xlsx>