



For Immediate Release

Contact: Carrie McCarthy, Director of Communications

January 23, 2023

**BERLIN AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD OF EDUCATION APPROVES
TWO REFERENDUMS QUESTIONS FOR THE APRIL 4, 2023 GENERAL ELECTION BALLOT**

At its January 23rd meeting, the Berlin Area School District Board of Education approved two referendum questions that will appear on the April 4, 2023 general election ballot.

One question asks for permission to exceed its state-set revenue limits by \$2.5 million annually for five years in an operational referendum beginning with the 2023-24 school year. Because it is a non-recurring referendum, the authority will automatically expire with the 2027-28 school year.

In Wisconsin, school districts are allowed to ask voters for permission to exceed the revenue limits, which are placed on districts under state law. These limits cap the amount of revenue districts can receive in state aid and property taxes. Berlin's revenue has been declining for the past several years at the same time that costs have been increasing.

The operational referendum is expected to have limited to no impact on the school tax mill rate. A school district's tax mill rate is affected by several factors including but not limited to fair market property values as well as student enrollment. The other factor impacting tax mill rates is the manner in which a school board manages past debt. The Berlin Area School District school board has both refinanced and prepaid on previous debt in order to save taxpayer money and keep the tax mill rate steady.

"The Berlin Area School District residents haven't been asked for additional operating revenue through referendum since the revenue limits began 30 years ago. It is clear that this board, and previous boards, have done everything they could to hold the line for taxpayers. The district is at a point where the projected deficit is so large that the district cannot sustain our current programs without additional funding," said Dr. Emmett Durtschi, Berlin Area School District Superintendent.

“If you look at state revenue to schools and inflationary pressure on expenses, deficits are growing quickly. It is an issue affecting schools and municipalities all over Wisconsin. The law allows us to go to the public and ask for additional revenue to close this gap,” Durtschi said.

The Board of Education also approved a second referendum question which asks voters to approve \$20 million dollars in facilities work, mainly at Clay Lambertson Elementary School, but also district-wide. Wisconsin law requires school districts to receive voter approval to invest in borrowing that they need to complete facilities or capital improvement items that are too costly to pay for in an annual operating budget.

“The Board felt it was critical to allow the public to vote on these referendum questions in an attempt to close the funding gap and provide needed improvements to our facilities,” said Catherine Kujawa, Board of Education President. “The Board is committed to continuing to invest in the future of the district and its students.”

If voters approve the capital referendum question, the tax impact would be \$40 annually on the owner of \$100,000 home. The total tax impact on an individual property or properties within a municipality may vary based on changes in fair market value determined by the Wisconsin Department of Revenue.

The additional revenue from the operational referendum would be used to address learning needs and facility maintenance.

The learning needs include:

- Attract and retain quality staff;
- Maintain educationally appropriate class sizes to maximize learning;
- Continue to provide instructional technology for student learning;
- Continue the programming already available that helps prepare students for employment, college, military and the community, through continuing a variety of class offerings, including career and technical education programming with dual credits.

The capital referendum would be used to address critical building facilities improvements. The majority of the needs are within the oldest portion of Clay Lambertson Elementary School and include:

Heating and cooling:

- Replacing the 1962 heating system with new equipment to increase efficiency and reduce maintenance costs.
- Adding air conditioning (currently only available in portions of the school) to improve air quality and create a healthier learning environment.

Safety and accessibility:

- Renovating restrooms to reduce maintenance costs and improve ADA accessibility.
- Reconfiguring traffic flow to better separate pedestrians and vehicles.
- Repairing the playground structures and upgrading for ADA accessibility.
- Renovating the main entrance and upgrading the security camera systems to improve student safety and allow for screening of visitors.
- Renovating the health office for confidentiality and ADA accessibility.
- Replacing worn floors and finishes.
- Remodeling and expanding the cafeteria to meet the needs of a larger student population.

District-wide improvements:

- Upgrading security camera systems to improve student safety.
- Reconfiguring traffic flow to better separate pedestrians and vehicles to improve safety.
- Replacing the high school auditorium's lighting and sound systems that are failing.
- Replacing high school classroom and hallway flooring where needed.

"If the referendums are voter approved, district officials will continue to contain costs and be responsible stewards of the district's finances," noted Dr. Durtschi.

Residents can expect much more information in the coming weeks explaining the referendums before the vote. The District will host public information meetings at the Clay Lamberton Elementary School Professional Learning Center on February 6 from 3:30-5 pm and March 10 at 11 a.m. These public information meetings will include walking tours of the school. The District's website will be updated with information on the meetings, the tax impact of the capital referendum, and frequently asked questions. A mailing is also being sent to all district residents.

"This is an important effort, and we want every interested resident to have the information that they need to cast an informed vote. I am happy to answer questions and do whatever it takes to help people find the information that they need," said Durtschi.

##