

ADVICE from Referendum Professionals

REFERENDUM PREP 101

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We reached out to professionals who work with school districts on referendums and asked them some basic questions that every school district, which is at some stage of preparation for a referendum, should know. The following article is a mix of their answers and advice, which focuses on many aspects of planning for success as well as basic referendum issues.

■ What is the process of filing for a referendum?

Many architects, contractors, legal and financial advisors have developed great resources that address the process of filing for a referendum. In addition, both the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) (dpi.state.wi.us — search for “referenda procedures”) and WASB (wasb.org — select “Communications” and then “Referendum Resource Center”) have resources available online.

■ What is the timing for the school board resolution?

There is a 70-day deadline for passing a resolution to hold a referendum. State law requires a school district to notify the DPI within 10 days after adopting a resolution to hold a referendum. The Government Accountability Board (GAB) is required to post the referenda questions to the Statewide Voter Registration System (SRVS). The district also needs to enter the referendum on the DPI School Finance Reporting Portal.

■ How can we make sure that we have the right ballot proposal giving the school district the best chance to be successful?

Optimal ballot proposals achieve two critical dimensions of alignment.

Ultimately they identify what and how much. The “what” relates to the content and purpose of the proposal. The “how much” relates to the level of taxation requested. (A third question that often needs to be addressed in informational materials is “why now.”)

To assure success, a well-designed, random-sample, scientific survey of the community (not just parents) is conducted to evaluate alignment of a potential ballot question.

■ How much time should we allow for planning a referendum?

It’s never too early to start planning. Districts often spend years working on the process of gathering stakeholder input, assessing needs, evaluating options and determining the right solution to bring to referendum. Although the amount of time can vary significantly in districts, 12-18 months of dedicated planning is typical for many of the referendum projects we work on.

■ When should we engage consultants in the process?

Districts should engage consultants as early as possible. Your consultants bring expertise in many areas and help you work through the referendum planning process. Supplement your district resources by drawing on their knowledge and services.

■ Additional Questions to Consider

Have you fully engaged all stakeholders?

Is there common understanding of both what you know about your district and what you believe the community wants for its children?

Are you positioned to assure excellence in education and all students achieve success? ■

THANK YOU

Thank you to the following professionals for their contributions to this article:

Christin Mlsna

business development and communications specialist;
J.H. Findorff & Son, Inc.

Michele A. Wiberg

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*Wisconsin Public Finance,
PMA Securities, Inc.*

Jerry Dudzik

vice president;
Springsted Incorporated

Steven Kieckhafer

partner;
Plunkett Raysich Architects