

Different Districts, Different Paths to Referendum Success

Every school district is different so the way they hold referendums should be different, too

SESSION *One Size Does Not Fit All! Facility and Referendum Strategies that Work*

Presenters Juda: Traci Davis, district administrator; McFarland: Andrew Briddell, district administrator; New Glarus: Jennifer Thayer, district administrator; J.H. Findorff & Son Inc.: Christin Mlsna, director of education market and communication services; Plunkett Raysich Architects: Steve Kieckhafer, partner, architect

A panel of speakers from three very different school districts, which all recently held successful referendums, shared their processes and strategies.

Andrew Briddell, superintendent of the McFarland School District — a suburban district outside of Madison — came to the district in 2015 just as the board was ready to commission a facility study in response to a community petition. After setting up a facility committee with sub-committees to work on various components of the project, the group gathered community input from all stakeholders. Ultimately, the board sent a three-question referendum plan to voters.

The district asked for permission to spend \$65 million on a variety of district facility improvements. There were also two questions asking for permission to exceed the revenue caps. One asked for additional funds to cover costs for expanding the facilities while the other asked for additional funds for maintaining the current school programs. All three questions passed easily in November 2016.

The process in the New Glarus School District — a district of about 1,000 students located about

30 minutes south of Madison — was much longer, according to New Glarus Superintendent Jennifer Thayer. Although the district's middle school was new, there were many other needs and the district asked Plunkett Raysich Architects to do a comprehensive assessment of the condition of the facilities.

Thayer said the district tries hard to keep its tax rate stable from year to year so officials worked with Robert W. Baird to determine how much money they could raise for facilities without increasing the tax rate. Officials helped prepare the community by talking about the facility needs before mentioning the board's interest in going to referendum. In the end, the district passed a \$5.8 million plan in 2016.

The small Juda School District in southwestern Wisconsin has about 300 students in a single building. “We had not held a referendum in 17 years when the board began to think about going to voters again,” said Traci Davis, Juda's superintendent and principal.

The district did not do any formal studies but discussed facility needs for 18 months using a standing board agenda item. After hiring J.H. Findorff



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& Son Inc. and other partners, the board held a series of public input meetings and specifically invited a cross-section of the community. The board held tours of the building and used Google surveys to gather more input.

The initial recommendation was a \$6.2 million plan with a separate question asking for permission to exceed the revenue caps to help maintain the facilities. The board later cut the proposal to \$5.7 million and the questions passed in 2016.

The panel members also shared lessons they had learned from their process of going to referendum as well as unexpected challenges they had faced.

But despite the different strategies, the one key, common denominator in each success story was clear, consistent and comprehensive communication.

“You can never communicate enough,” Davis said.

“Communicate with everybody and anybody who will give you the time of day,” Briddell agreed. ■