

11/15/2012 7:30:00 AM

## **District moves forward with referendum (Updated)**

***Vote could take place as early as February***

<http://www.rhinelanderdailynews.com/main.asp?SectionID=6&SubSectionID=47&ArticleID=54256&TM=49199.71>



**Marcus Neemann**  
Reporter/Photographer

The School District of Rhinelander is headed back to referendum.

During a special meeting Tuesday, the Board of Education directed administrators to develop language for a \$4 million recurring referendum that would be in effect until the state's school funding formula is revised.

Board members said the referendum is needed to fill the district's \$3 million 2013-'14 budget shortfall. Although the district's deficit is \$3 million, the board is looking at a \$4 million referendum to ensure that all costs are covered.

The referendum language will be reviewed at a meeting set for 6:30 p.m. Dec. 4. It is anticipated that the language will be approved so that the referendum can take place on Feb. 19, 2013.

That will allow the district to meet its timelines for layoffs if the referendum fails and cuts need to be implemented.

Currently, taxpayers are paying \$63 per \$100,000 of equalized value on the referendum that expires this year. If approved, this new referendum would add approximately \$105 per \$100,000 of equalized value to that amount.

The motion passed unanimously.

Knowing that it can't take a referendum to the public without making the consequences of a "no" vote clear, the board also made a motion to move forward with \$3,010,218 worth of cuts that would be implemented should the referendum fail.

The dollar amount on the cuts could be increased as the administration was also directed to present specific dollar amounts regarding administration drawdowns and insurance changes that could ease the district's budget troubles.

The cuts approved would:

- End the district's participation in the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program, saving the district \$778,835.
- Cut \$181,930 worth of electives at James Williams Middle School (JWMS).
- Cut \$335,810 worth of electives at Rhinelander High School (RHS).
- Cut \$122,211 worth of electives at the elementary level.

- Close both charter schools, saving the district \$1,115,692.
- Cut spending on activities and athletics by \$235,050.
- Cut \$120,345 worth of full-time equivalent employees (FTE) from RHS.
- Cut \$120,345 worth of FTE from JWMS.

If the referendum fails and the cuts go through, the board will work with building principals to decide how to implement the cuts to electives, staff, activities and athletics.

None of the board members were in favor of any of the cuts. In fact, many of them said they worry reducing academic and athletic offerings could lead to a mass exodus of students from the district.

But, at this point, the board said, it has to have a list in hand in case the public is not willing to support another referendum.

"We need to go for a referendum, we can't make these cuts," Board Treasurer Mike Roberts said. "I didn't even want to vote on these cuts but I do agree that with the history of our referendums in this community, we need to lay out there what could be the potential situation if we don't make them so ... that the public can see what the referendum will save us."

How they got there

The meeting started with a presentation from Business Director Marta Kwiatkowski on the district's predicament.

The main point of the presentation was to show that the current budgetary situation in the district is not a result of mismanagement by the board, but was caused by inequalities in the state funding formula.

For starters, Kwiatkowski spoke about how the board was able to lower the levy by \$1 million for the 1992-'93 school year.

However, that year also saw the implementation of revenue limits, which were put in place to limit the amount of taxpayer dollars that may be raised through state aid and property taxes.

Those limits are based on the previous year's spending, which meant SDR started off the new revenue limit era with a \$1 million hole. Add that up over the 20 years the limits have been in place and the district has lost about \$20 million in taxing authority.

Because of that, the district has had to cut over \$11 million dollars since 2002-'03.

Other aspects of the state funding formula also hinder the district, Kwiatkowski said, including the fact that many outside the area see Rhinelander as a property-rich district.

"The formula does not take into consideration that the property values are high due to lake

homes and not because of the income, but the formula only looks at the property values," Kwiatkowski said.

Because of the way the formula works, state aid continues to drop at an alarming rate, while the burden of funding everything falls more and more on local taxpayers.

Until the formula is changed at the state level, Kwiatkowski said, the district will continue to face the budget deficits it has seen over the past decade or so.

That is why the board decided to add language making the referendum recurring until the state funding formula is changed.

The board is also encouraging citizens to contact their state representatives to push for changes to the formula to increase fairness.

## Public Comments

One of the district's main reasons for holding the meeting was to hear the public's thoughts and feelings on the proposed cuts and the referendum.

45 people came forward to speak. All of them were against the cuts, most spoke favorably about a referendum, and many held back tears.

Here is a sample of what was said.

"Electives are what keep most students engaged in and outside of the classroom," RHS senior Lindsey Lieck said. "Cutting electives will affect every single student, no matter what their interests are outside of the classroom. Elective courses are what make high school a higher level of education and they are what make us the people we become."

"Education is key in our community. We need a great education system to bring people to this community, to help Rhinelander grow and flourish," added Jayla Paulson, a junior at RHS. "Without a good educational program, we will not be attractive to new businesses or better professions."

"Why is music so important? Why are electives so important? They teach abilities most other classes can't teach you, ... they teach you social skills, how to communicate, how to work together as a group," RHS senior Ryan Lieck said.

"How I view high school is that it's like a big, blank coloring book. We don't know what's going to happen or what kind of colors we're going to get here, but the electives, they're like the crayons and they color for us the coloring book that we're going to have with us for the next four years of our lives. Considering cutting the electives is like breaking the crayons," said Kate Hardar, RHS freshman.

"I work at the hospital and physicians looking at coming to the area are looking at our education system, they're looking at our district," noted parent Ann Heise. "They won't come if we don't have a quality school system. I think we've been doing fantastic so far but I truly believe if we are considering getting rid of the electives, we are doing a huge disservice to our students as well as our entire community."

Another parent, Shishir Sheth, offered this statement.

"My wife and I moved here 12 years ago and we moved up here from Miami. We did not move up here because we thought the night-life here would be nice. We didn't move here because of the opera," he said. "There are many fine dining establishments in this town but we didn't move here because of those. When we heard about Rhinelander as a place to raise our kids, we were very interested in the school system and the more we looked, the more we liked and, truly, I feel blessed to have had my two older children go through the high school here. It is truly a gem. If these cuts go through, it will no longer be anything special, I don't think, and it will be a huge loss to the community."

Marcus Neemann may be reached at [marcus@rivernewsonline.com](mailto:marcus@rivernewsonline.com).