

School Referendum Coming

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Green Bay Area Public Schools (GBAPS) might be #1 in the state for number of graduates who've earned college credit and #1 for number of students earning industry certificates, but the money still goes only so far. Even though GBAPS' class of 2024 earned \$5 million in college scholarships, and more than 100 of them earned the state Seal of Biliteracy, still, there are roofs to be repaired, boilers to be replaced, and an unsalvageable elementary school on the west side of Green Bay. Hence, a big referendum.

On the November ballot, voters will be asked to approve a \$183 million referendum, giving the school district permission to borrow that amount of money. Your mill rate will **not** go up due to the new debt. What the money will accomplish is about \$26 million in needed maintenance for the 40+ school buildings that require ongoing repairs and upgrades year after year. And it will provide safety and security upgrades for some schools at a total cost of about \$30 million. And, finally, it will provide \$126.5 million to improve the schools that will be receiving additional students soon and also make possible a new school for the consolidated student populations of MacArthur, Kennedy and Keller schools.

Why consolidate schools? Because the Green Bay district is experiencing what school districts all over the country are seeing: a declining student population simply due to a declining birth rate – people just don't have as many kids as their parents and grandparents did. So, GBAPS can save \$5 million every year by consolidating schools for better use of both facilities and staff. As those students are moved into different schools, though, the district wants them to have safe, appropriate learning spaces.

Voters might wonder how the district can possibly borrow \$183 million without raising the mill rate (the amount multiplied by each \$1000 of the home's fair market value). Since 2016, the mill rate has actually been decreasing; the mill rate in 2022 was the lowest in decades. Fiscal responsibility is the reason for that, as the district has, over the years, borrowed, paid down its debt, and relied on voter support to allow for additional conservative borrowing. That said, Wisconsin's fourth-largest school district will face \$450- \$500 million in maintenance needs over the next decades. As the district consolidates its schools, the goal is to ensure that the *receiving* schools are ready to offer *all* students safe, secure, and supportive spaces.

The current referendum continues the work begun with the 2017 and 2022 referenda. Those projects added secure entrances in the elementary schools, addressed deferred maintenance in east side schools, upgraded special-use spaces, and provided updated instructional spaces. This time the district intends to adapt to the declining birth rate and also give the west side the new elementary school it needs. Now it's up to the voters.