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TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

Kenosha Unified heads to operational referendum vote next February

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Price
SUBMITTED PHOTO

Jillian Craig

Kenosha Unified voters will be asked to approve a non-recurring operational referendum next February.

The ballot question will ask voters to exceed the state-imposed revenue limit by $23 million per year for five years for non-recurring purposes.

If passed on Feb. 18, the funding would allow the district to increase interventionists, expand course offerings, provide equitable prep time, increase educational support professional pay, upgrade security cameras, increase security educational professionals and create more secured entrances at district buildings.

According to the district, funding provided through the referendum would be used to "to implement (the district's) goal of increasing the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced in reading and math by 12%, while also moving forward with state-mandated programs, such as Act 20 and its science of reading practices, to enrich reading instruction and increase student proficiency."

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The referendum comes as the district faces a $19 million budget deficit due to declining enrollment and state aid not keeping pace with inflation, despite rising costs in utilities, health insurance, transportation and salaries.

"We're really crossing our fingers on this," KUSD's Chief Financial Officer Tarik Hamdan told the Kenosha News. "I wish I could be more optimistic about the state budget proposals, but history has shown us that proposals are just proposals until they're passed into law, and we can't bank on that."

Hamdan said the district will have to "increase our revenue streams, otherwise we will face more cuts that the community is not in favor of."

"Because of the nature of our business, with about 80% of our budget dedicated to staff, it's inevitable that it would affect staff in some way," he said.

It also follows a school security incident in which a 13-year-old Mahone Middle School student attempted to enter Roosevelt Elementary School with what were initially believed to be real weapons, later found to be airsoft guns, on Nov. 7. The incident spurred a review of district security policies, training and identified both immediate and proposed security upgrades, including new cameras and secure entrances at a number of attendance centers.

"We do not have the flexibility to raise prices like corporations could, so our only option, when we don't have the funds, is to frankly reduce our costs, and that is painful for everybody on this board," said School Board member Todd Price.

School Board member Rebecca Stevens said there isn't time to wait and see what the state decides to give to school districts in the next two-year budget cycle.

"It's too important for our children, for our grandchildren, for the future of our community," she said. "And we have done our due diligence as best we can. We had to adjust, because we can't go to the public and say 'We need more money,' if we haven't done everything we possibly can."

School Board members Bob Tierney and Kristine Schmaling cast dissenting votes when the board decided the issue of the referendum question Tuesday night.

Tierney expressed concern about public support for the referendum, and was concerned teacher prep time was not a guarantee.

"When that scenario came out (in the survey), it asked for $19 million, we had a 51.5% chance of passing. When it jumped up to $28 million, it dropped down to 36.3% chance of passing. So if you add $4 million to that, you're going to be at 44% right now, according to the data we have (and) the survey we spent money on," he said. "I don't see it passing right now and I don't want to ask taxpayers to go for something if it's not going to pass because we do have a penalty for that."

Schmaling said she was concerned about the burden the referendum would impose on taxpayers, and thought more teacher prep time could be implemented without having to go to referendum.

"I'm concerned that, without any change at the state level or any other level, the taxpayers are going to be looked at time and time again to do the work our state lawmakers are required to do. So that's frustrating for me," she said. "Just because someone votes 'no' on a referendum doesn't mean that they don't support local schools. We still want successful, productive schools."

Public speaks

Multiple people spoke out during public comment about the referendum question.

Carl Bryan spoke in favor of it, citing several other school districts across the state being forced to go to referendum in the last year.

"We cannot afford to maintain the status quo. KUSD must pursue a referendum to secure the support necessary to create the schools our community deserves," he said. "While systemic change is badly needed at the state level, Kenosha's children cannot wait. It is time for the board to place a referendum resolution on the February ballot to give the community a say in the future of our public schools."

Daniel McBride said he thought the board was using the safety incident from Nov. 7 as a way to pass the referendum.

"I feel that this board is using what could have been a horrific incident to pass this referendum, covering their shortcomings and failures," he said.

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By Jillian Craig

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