



VIROQUA AREA SCHOOLS

Questions or Comments?

Contact Tom Burkhalter, District Administrator

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Community Referendum Information Meetings

Two community information meetings are also scheduled to give residents a chance to learn about the referendum, ask questions, and provide feedback.

Thursday, February 27 at 5:30 p.m.

Monday, March 10 at 6:30 p.m.

Both meetings will be held in HS/MS Room 229.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are the school district's financial needs?

Like most Wisconsin school districts, Viroqua Area Schools is struggling to balance its budget due to an inadequate state education funding system, a lack of state aid to public schools in recent years, and rising expenses.

School districts in our state are primarily funded by a combination of state aid and local property taxes. We are also subject to a revenue limit, first imposed at the state level in 1993. Over the past three decades, the revenue limit for districts like ours has failed to keep up with the pace of inflation and rising costs.

If revenues *had* kept pace with inflation since 2009, school districts like ours would receive about \$3,200 more per student in the 2024-25 school year.

At the same time, costs are on the rise, impacting all areas of our district's operations. Costs for things like running our buses, heating and maintaining our schools, and providing a robust offering of courses and strong curriculum continue to increase, as do other expenses that are out of the district's control.

Additionally, the needs of our students have increased dramatically. These are expenses for state and federal required services for which the district receives inadequate funding.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction does not anticipate the funding formula for schools changing in the near future. This means that, unless the state legislature allocates more state funds for public education, Viroqua Area Schools will need more local funding to continue to provide the high-quality education our families and community have come to expect.

What steps have been taken previously to reduce spending and balance the budget?

The School Board and administration have implemented cost-saving measures in recent years as part of an effort to respect the needs of our property taxpayers and balance those with the needs of our students and staff.

Among the steps taken by district leaders in recent years include:

- Increasing the share of benefits paid by employees
- Freezing budgets for supplies
- Delaying curricular and extracurricular improvements
- Elimination of a summer school principal position
- Reduction in the number of contracted days for some administrators
- Leaving six teaching positions unfilled (even though our enrollment is not declining)



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What is the proposed solution to address the district's financial challenges?

On Tuesday, April 1, 2025, our community will vote on a non-recurring operational referendum question for the Viroqua Area Schools. If this measure is approved, the district will be able to exceed its state-imposed revenue limit by \$1.3 million per year, starting in the 2025-26 school year.

We would use these funds to:

- Maintain class sizes and ensure individualized attention for our students.
- Continue offering robust academic and extracurricular programs.
- Attract and retain quality staff by offering competitive salaries and benefits.
- Continue facility maintenance and minor improvements that foster a safe and updated learning environment.

Are operational referendums common in Wisconsin?

Yes. Our school district has relied upon an operational referendum for financial support since one was originally approved by our voters in 2004. In the two decades since, our voters have renewed the referendum on three occasions - 2010, 2015, and 2020.

More than 400 school districts statewide have proposed operational referendum questions since 2010 - including 79 last November alone. In our region, the school districts of Desoto, G-E-T, Kickapoo, La Farge, North Crawford, Richland, West Salem and Westby all receive \$250,000 to \$3.45 million annually from operational referendums.

Didn't our voters already approve a referendum recently?

Yes, voters in our community approved a *capital/building* referendum in 2022 that provided \$20.5 million for a series of major facility improvement projects.

What is the difference between a capital/building referendum and an operational referendum?

In Wisconsin, school boards can ask voters to approve two types of referendums: an operational referendum and a capital (or bond) referendum.

An *operational referendum* is used to fund the ongoing day-to-day expenses of running a school district. This can include salaries and benefits for teachers and staff, utilities, classroom supplies, transportation, and other operating costs. **This is the proposed question on the ballot in April 2025.**

A *capital/building referendum* is used to fund major building projects and improvements. This can include the construction of new school buildings, significant renovations or additions to existing facilities, purchasing land, or major equipment expenditures. Funds from a building referendum are not allowed to be used for operational purposes.

What would happen if the operational referendum is not renewed?

If the operational referendum is not approved, Viroqua Area Schools will be forced to consider reducing programs and services for students, increasing class sizes, limiting or eliminating some extracurricular activities, delaying essential maintenance projects, and reducing staff by 6-10 employees.

Based on state funding formulas, an operational referendum is the *only* option to prevent additional cuts to programming and opportunities for students.



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How would an approved operational referendum affect property taxes?

A renewed referendum would have an estimated annual school district property tax increase of \$11 for every \$100,000 of property value. A property valued at \$250,000 equates to an increase of approximately \$28 per year (or \$2.29 monthly) above the current tax rate.

The district and School Board respect the needs of our property taxpayers and have worked to keep the tax impact of the referendum as low as possible. Since 2018, the district's mill rate has declined by 20.9%, to stand at a rate of \$7.10 per \$1,000 of property value. This ranks lower than many of our peers:

- N-O-W: \$8.99
- West Salem: \$8.72
- Westby: \$7.90
- Hillsboro: \$7.35
- La Farge: \$7.12
- Kickapoo: \$6.35

The tax impact of the renewed referendum is projected to increase the mill rate to \$7.21 per \$1,000 of property value.

Why did my property taxes go up this year?

Several factors contributed to the district related increase in property taxes for our district residents:

- **2022 Capital Referendum** – The debt from the voter-approved 2022 capital referendum is being phased into the tax levy, impacting overall tax rates.
- **State Revenue Limit Increases** – The state increased the revenue limit for schools, allowing districts to collect more local taxes. However, the state did not provide adequate aid to offset these increases, shifting more of the burden to local taxpayers.
- **Voucher Costs** – Our district is required to pay approximately \$950,000 for private school vouchers, which further strains local resources and increases tax impacts.
- **Property Valuations** – Increases in the estimated fair market value of property, which is determined by the WI State Department of Revenue, can also impact property taxes.

Despite these challenges, we are committed to responsible financial management while ensuring quality education for our students.

When is election day?

Election day is Tuesday, April 1, 2025.

Where can I cast my ballot on election day?

District residents can find their [polling location](#) for Tuesday, April 1, by searching with their home address.

Can I vote absentee in this election?

Yes, voters may request that an absentee ballot be mailed to them for any reason. However, you must be registered before you can request an absentee ballot.

If you are registered, you can request an absentee ballot by visiting <https://myvote.wi.gov/en-us/VoteAbsentee>. Note that you must [provide a photo ID](#) with your absentee ballot request.



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When is the deadline to register to vote?

Eligible voters can register up to election day, and can even register at the polls.

The deadline to register by mail is March 12, 2025. If you miss this deadline, you can still register in person at your municipal clerk's office until 5:00 p.m. on March 28, or at your polling place on Election Day.

To learn more about registering to vote, visit <https://myvote.wi.gov/register-To-Vote>.

What is the exact question that will appear on the ballot?

Voters will see the following question on their ballots on Tuesday, April 1:

BE IT RESOLVED by the School Board of the Viroqua Area School District, Vernon and Crawford Counties, Wisconsin that the revenues included in the School District budget be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Section 121.91, Wisconsin Statutes, by \$1,300,000 per year for two years, beginning with the 2025-2026 school year and ending with the 2026-2027 school year, for non-recurring purposes consisting of operation and maintenance expenses of the District.

What's the difference between public charter school and private voucher schools?

Both options exist within the broader education landscape, but it's important to understand how their funding structures impact public education in different ways.

Public charter schools such as Viroqua Area Montessori School, Laurel High School, and Better Futures High School, are part of Viroqua Area Schools, and both publicly funded and accountable to state education guidelines. These schools do not charge tuition.

It's also important to note that all funding for our public charter school students flows through Viroqua Area Schools. This keeps critical resources within our public education system, and allows for local oversight and support.

Private voucher schools are private institutions that receive taxpayer funds through state voucher programs. Examples may include Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School, Luther High School, Aquinas High School, and Academy of Excellence Online School-Milwaukee.

While these schools operate independently of public schools, funding for vouchers still appears as part of Viroqua Area Schools' tax bill, which was an impact of \$952,282 in 2024-25 — or \$1 out of every \$7. This means that local taxpayers are funding private education through public school taxes, even though voucher schools are not required to follow the same accountability standards or accommodate all students.