

Vote "No" on Manitowoc school referendums

Wisconsin 2:24 p.m. CST November 3, 2014



Manitowoc Public School District (MPSD) tries to solve its symptoms with more money, but doesn't address the root causes — increasing expenses and decreasing enrollment. Since 2008, enrollment has declined 5.5 percent and it continues to decline with 6.4 percent reduction in staff. MPSD's solution is three recurring referenda. Since declining enrollment decreases state funding, dealing with the root causes becomes imperative. During the Oct. 22 information meeting it was clear MPSD has no idea how much money is really needed and \$2 million, a 9.45 percent taxpayer increase, is only the start.

Dictionary.com defines "recurring" as "occurring or appearing again." These recurring referenda never expire. If all three pass, MPSD would be allowed to exceed the regulatory cap by \$2 million per year for as many years as MPSD desires. During an Oct. 22 information session, Marcia Flaherty said she can't foresee a time when MPSD wouldn't use the entire \$2 million. That \$2 million a year via referenda will cost MPSD taxpayers maybe \$20 million, \$40 million or \$60 million depending on how many years the \$2 million is assessed. Referenda do not expire so this amount is subject to MPSD's discretion!

MPSD blames its cash flow problem on a 1993 law. MPSD must adjust to a law that has survived both Democratic and Republican leadership in Madison. To me, good leadership means taking an adverse situation and making it work. According to MPSD's Sept. 23 draft budget (pages 20-28), federal funding decreased \$266,000 (-5.7 percent) while state funding decreased \$246,000 (-0.7 percent). Approving the three referenda will allow MPSD to avoid making necessary decisions to deal with declining enrollment and increasing costs today.

I asked Marcia Flaherty and Ken Mischler if all options were considered. Both said "yes," but MPSD continues to fund un-mandated programs not impacting students and teachers in the classroom because Mischler said these can't be cut. I asked if "zero budgeting" was evaluated to truly determine MPSD's operational needs and Mischler responded "no."

Mayor Justin Nickels led the tough choices that forced the City of Manitowoc to live within its means. I believe MPSD should be held to the same level of accountability.

I have 20 years' experience developing and implementing strategic plans. MPSD has not shown it has a plan. If a parent loses a job, families make choices in order to reduce costs. It is easy to make an emotional plea, but change is hard. There are many dedicated, hard-working people in MPSD but administration and the school board have not provided the leadership to ensure MPSD students' continued, future success.

MPSD must evaluate all its options and only approach taxpayers as a last resort with a comprehensive plan showing exactly how much, how long and for what money will be spent. The current referenda are \$2 million annually on a recurring basis until MPSD decides to discontinue the additional tax. All stakeholders deserve a comprehensive plan not a request for \$2 million annually with vague details.

Just Vote NO!

Jeff Dewane

Manitowoc

Editor's note: In the interest of providing the most up-to-date, accurate information, we had our reporters check some of the statistics quoted in the letter. The final budget approved by the MPSD School Board included an additional reduction of \$324,080 in state aid not predicted in the draft budget. Additionally, statistics cited by school district officials show enrollment declined 2.5 percent between the 2007-08 school year and the 2012-2013 school year, the last year for which data is available.

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