

Whitnall Referendum Frequently Asked Questions

Why do Wisconsin school districts seek referendums?

There are two types of school referendums: Capital and Operational. A Capital Referendum, commonly referred to as a “facilities” referendum, is a voter-approved increase in taxes, the funds from which are earmarked to cover the costs of the capital project. These costs include everything from remodeling to building and providing the needed infrastructure, fixtures, furnishings, and equipment. Districts use capital referendums to complete projects that are too costly to do under annual budget limitations. Operational referendums pay for everyday costs like utility bills, routine maintenance, and staff salaries.

What kind of referendum is the Whitnall 2024 Referendum?

The November 2024 referendum will be a Capital Referendum. The Whitnall School District prides itself on responsible operations and continues to be able to balance budgets and maintain a healthy fund balance, so an Operational Referendum is not needed.

What is the preliminary cost breakdown for the referendum?

Whitnall High School

- \$20.5M Addition (8-lane Pool, Support Spaces, Mezzanine Seating, and Event Lobby)
- \$24.4 Renovation (Science Wing, Kitchen, Auditorium, Locker Rooms, Gyms, Weight/Fitness)
- \$0.6M Sitework*
- \$8.3M Capital Improvement Plan Items

Whitnall Middle School

- \$1.7M Capital Improvement Plan Items

Edgerton Elementary School

- \$9.7M Addition (Gym and Classrooms)
- \$3.2M Renovation (4K Classrooms, Office Expansion, Cafeteria/Kitchen, Restrooms)
- \$1.4M Sitework and Courtyard*
- \$4.2M Capital Improvement Plan Items

Hale Corners Elementary

- \$5.1M Capital Improvement Plan Items

Total

Not to exceed \$79.1 million

*Sitework includes anything that impacts the site, such as parking, drives, sidewalks, playgrounds, utilities (e.g., water and sewer), plantings, stormwater management, etc.

Why is a Capital Referendum needed?

In 2017, an outside firm conducted a thorough assessment of our buildings and grounds, which formed the basis for our long-range facility master planning. The successful 2018 referendum was only the first implementation phase, and many needs remain throughout our aging buildings. Over the past six years, the district has invested \$5.3M in operational dollars to

maintain our buildings and address priority projects. However, many needs are too costly to address through the district's operational budget and require funding through a capital (facilities) referendum. The district established a Citizens Advisory Committee, sent a community survey focused on planning, consulted with staff, held building tours, conducted community focus groups, and conducted a community referendum survey, which showed the community supported a referendum to improve facilities. This community engagement led the board to adopt the referendum resolution.

Did all community residents have the opportunity to complete the survey?

Yes, all households received the survey by mail and had an opportunity to submit their responses either electronically or by mailing the survey back.

Why now?

The district continues to be fiscally responsible, and the board has realized the need for future investment in our schools, so through defeasance (prepayment of debt), we have been able to pay off our 2018 referendum debt 14 years earlier than planned, saving more than \$2.5M in interest costs. During that same period, the mill rate has continued to decline. This financial position makes the timing right to consider undertaking significant projects to address our facilities' needs while keeping the mill rate close to our current mill rate. Additionally, the survey conducted by School Perceptions, an independent education research firm, indicated community support. If we do not address the needs now, it will cost more in future years due to inflation.

Who is School Perceptions, and why did Whitnall use them?

Writing a survey can be challenging due to several factors that can impact the quality and reliability of the responses. Some factors include question clarity, bias in questions, survey length, response options, target audience, survey distribution, respondent confidentiality, and analysis and interpretation. School Perceptions is an independent education research firm with more than 20 years of experience conducting surveys across all domains of education nationwide. Since 2018, across nearly 900 strategic planning and referendum survey projects, its referendum predictions have been accurate more than 90% of the time.

What is defeasance?

Dollars are paid into an escrow account that earns interest until the debt is callable (able to be prepaid). The escrow is structured to pay for all debt service on the defeased debt. On the call date of the bonds, the bonds are paid off using the initial cash deposit plus interest earned on the account. The debt is taken off the district's books at the time of the defeasance. The board of education recognized the district's capital needs and, knowing future needs, used defeasance to plan for them while saving significantly on the interest associated with the debt.

Was the community made aware of the district's defeasance?

The district communicated defeasance as a strategy in the budget presentation each year.

[Please refer to slides 9-10 of the 2023-2024 school year presentation.](#)

How will the Capital Referendum affect our taxes?

If the community votes in favor of the referendum, the impact on the school portion of your property tax bill would increase by \$0.03 per \$1,000 (\$3.00 per \$100,000) of Fair Market Property Value.

Please visit the tax calculator [here](#).

What will happen to the school tax rate if the referendum question is not approved?

As described above, the district takes pride in its responsible operations, ensuring balanced budgets each year and taking opportunities such as defeasance to pay off debt. As a result, the past referendum debt will be removed from our budget, potentially resulting in a projected decrease of the school property tax rate portion to \$4.95 per \$1,000 of Fair Market Value.

What if the Capital Referendum does not pass?

If the Capital Referendum does not pass, these projects will not be completed as the costs far exceed what we can afford through our annual budget. Likewise, the projects would be even more costly if we returned to voters with a similar ask in the future. The pool has exceeded its useful life and will likely fail in the next few years, as will the chiller at the High School. The Edgerton chiller failed in the late summer of 2024, and a short-term rental is being used. Without the Capital Referendum, the District will not be able to meet the current instructional and programmatic needs. Without this referendum, our community will be challenged to provide facilities and educational offerings competitive with those in the surrounding school districts, making Whitnall less attractive to families and to high-quality educational staff members while significantly minimizing our ability to effectively engage students in learning the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in their future.

Are other local districts proposing a capital referendum?

Cudahy School District- \$12 million capital + \$10.4 million operational

West Allis-West Milwaukee- School District \$70 million capital + \$5.8 million operational

Wauwatosa School District- \$60 million capital + \$64.4 million operational

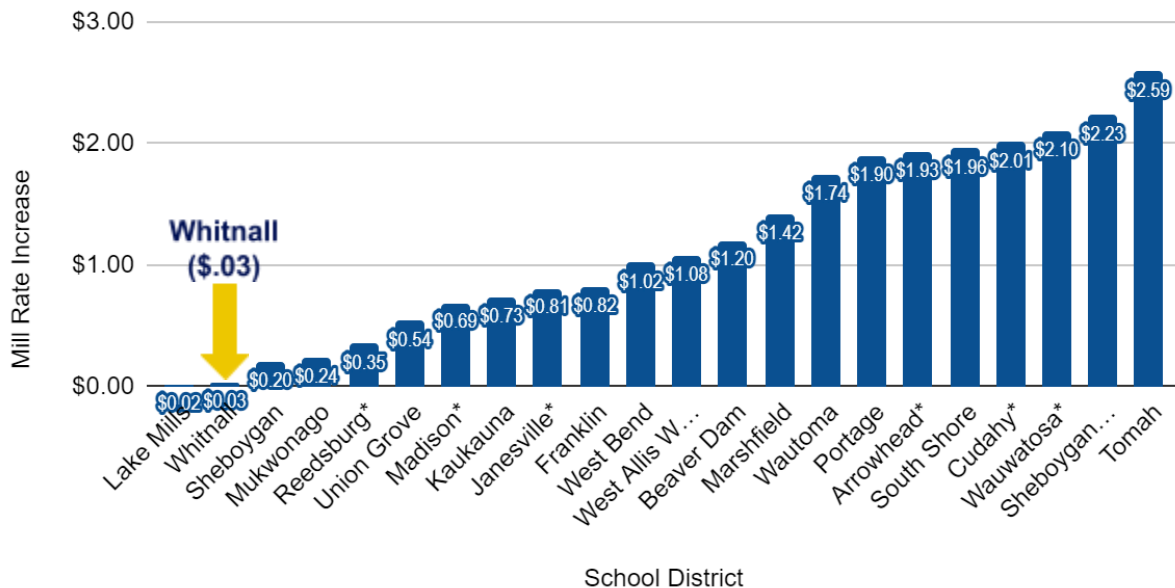
Mukwonago School District- \$89.1 million capital

Franklin School District- \$145 million capital

What are the tax rate impacts of other referenda across the state?

Mill Rate Increase Comparison Fall 2024

*includes both capital and operational referendum questions



I am a resident of Whitnall School District, but I have no children in the schools; why should I care about this referendum?

A school referendum is an investment in the community. When completed, school improvements lead directly to better student performance—and, as a result, to more valuable communities. Higher academic performance in neighborhood schools makes communities more attractive to businesses and new residents; research indicates that home values increase by \$1.50 for every \$1.00 of capital spending on schools (Cellini et al., 2010)

Does the quality of facilities impact student success and teacher retention?

There is a body of research connecting the quality of school facilities to student outcomes, including achievement and attitude (McGuffey, 1982; Berner, 1993; Lewis, 2000; O'Neill & Oates, 2001; Buckley et al., 2004a; Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008) and teacher attitude and behavior (Lowe, 1990; Dawson & Parker, 1998; Schneider, 2003; Buckley et al., 2004b).

References

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