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Ripon Board of Education Referendum and Annual Report to the Community

RIPON, WI — Following the Ripon Board of Education Annual Meeting, Superintendent Mary Whitrock shared information regarding the upcoming referendum, the growth in the school district's virtual school and changes to the Annual Report taxpayers will receive in the mail this fall from the district.

Will you review the referendum planning process?
Throughout the 2019-20 school year, the Board engaged stakeholders district-wide in building an understanding of the current financial condition of the Ripon Area School District. The strategic planning team, composed of district staff, parents, and community members met to review the academic achievement of the district and the budget impact of providing those educational services.

How do the Board's priority areas impact planning for the referendum?
The Board used the information from the community engagement sessions to begin planning for an operational referendum question to be on the Fall 2020 election ballot. Through this strategic planning process, the team also reviewed the tremendous progress made over the past year on the Board's priority areas: student learning and engagement, human resources, service and partnership, and finance and operations. They also further developed the layout of this year's Annual Report to the community.

How has the previous operational referendums impacted the district?
The previous referendums have provided the district with funds to maintain its facilities, purchase textbooks and curriculum materials, and provide one-to-one devices for students. In March, when the Governor closed schools due to COVID-19, Ripon made a dramatic shift to virtual instruction for all students 4PS-Grade 12. The district's quick response and outstanding virtual learning model quickly set Ripon up to be a leader in online learning. This was thanks to the previous operational referendum, which made technology a top priority in the district.

What can taxpayers expect to see in the district's Annual Report:
This year's Annual Report provides highlights of the work and outcomes from the 2019-20 school year and shows the direction that lies ahead for 2020-2021. Due to COVID, state mandated testing was paused as well as state issued report cards. Most achievement data will be from the previous year. The report includes a new "By the Numbers" section as taxpayers expressed interest in knowing facts such as how many square feet of buildings are heated, what district energy savings has been, and how many students are in HS band and choir.

What is the impact of the operational referendum?
In 2014, voters in the Ripon Area School District (RASD) approved an operational referendum that will expire in 2021. The board is now seeking approval from the community for a replacement referendum so that the district can avoid losing a significant amount of revenue. If it is approved, the referendum would have a net-zero property tax impact.

The Board took the action after carefully considering the district's needs and analyzing the results of a community-wide survey. In that survey, about 80 percent of district residents indicated they would support an operational referendum for technology, curriculum materials and facilities maintenance with no tax increase.

Why do we need the referendum if we have had so much growth in enrollment from Odyssey, the new virtual school?
Everything in the world of education is based on per pupil revenue and expenses. The open-enrolled students coming into Ripon bring in new revenue, and also new expenses. The open-enrollment tuition rate is $8,125 for a student not in special education. Whereas, the revenue for a resident pupil is $10,022. So a new open-enrolled student brings in about 19% less revenue than a resident student does. However, academically, both students have the same educational needs.

In our first year with under 100 students, we had a part-time principal, four part-time middle/high school teachers, two full-time elementary teachers and one office staff member. This year, with 350 students, Odyssey has grown to include a full-time principal, a full-time guidance counselor, four full-time middle/high teachers, six full-time elementary teachers, a part-time speech therapist, a part-time special education teacher, and 1.5 office staff members.

Some expenses are reduced in a virtual setting, without the facility, food service, and busing expenses of a brick and mortar school. Also, the district can more efficiently spread district-level services such as accounting, payroll, human resources, and insurance across nearly 2,000 students, rather than 1,600. The greatest benefit of the virtual school is having the opportunity to meet the needs of Ripon residents who were previously homeschooled or open enrolled out of our district.

What will the referendum be used for?
If the referendum is approved, the district would use the funds generated for a variety of purposes. Each year, it would designate $160,000 toward the purchase of new student laptops, teacher workstations, wireless routers, computer servers, and interactive smart screens.

Additionally, RASD would use $225,000 for the curriculum department to continue its replacement timeline for each K-12 curricular area. Funds would be used to replace textbooks, workbooks and educational software, as well as to purchase specific types of equipment for science labs, music programs and physical education classes.

The district would also designate funds for the replacement of a failing roof at Ripon Middle School and flooring at Murray Park/Quest Elementary School. In subsequent years, referendum dollars would be used to maintain buildings, equipment and school sites.

Where can taxpayers go to learn more?
To learn more about the November 3 referendum and the process the district and Board used to address RASD's financial needs, visit https://www.ripon.k12.wi.us/community/2020-referendum.cfm.

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