

School District of Ashland

Press Release

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For immediate release

Call the superintendent, Dr. Keith Hilts, with questions at 715-682-7080.

Community Input Leads Ashland Schools Referendum to Improve Every School Building

After 6 months of listening sessions with staff and community, over 400 volunteer hours of community facility task force members, and several public school board meetings; the School District of Ashland will be giving voters the opportunity to vote on \$34,360,000 in improvements with a referendum election on April 5, 2016.

“Students in the Ashland schools deserve to be inspired. Students need to have a clear, hopeful vision of their futures.” states Superintendent Dr. Keith Hilts. “In addition, students need to know they can create a healthy, productive life in Ashland or anywhere else they choose. The proposed facility upgrades help the school district make that happen for students. The School Board appreciates the time and effort of the community task force to help make sure the plan reflects the needs and values of the community.”

The project is complex and intended to improve every school building to meet the ever-changing needs of students, families and education. The monthly tax impact for a residential home valued at \$100,000 is estimated to be \$9.83. “The School Board believes this is the right time financially for the community to consider this investment due to several important things that were considered by the board and task force.” Ashland School Board Chairperson Jessica Pergolski said. “The School District is debt free, interest rates are near historical lows, and the state of Wisconsin will be paying 46% of our bond payments using today’s funding formulas.”

The broad goals of the project include:

- Create spaces where children love to learn,
- Provide healthy, safe and secure schools for our children,
- Stay ahead of maintenance projects and protecting the community investment in schools,
- Build a new field house with school and community spaces including a walking/running track,
- Improve spaces to support the arts and local culture, and
- Create spaces to support improved wellness for students and families.

View the entire facility planning process and proposed plan on the district webpage under referendum information or directly at www.Ashlandschoolslongrangeplan.com

Background information:

How did the Ashland School Board come to this decision?

Just over a year ago, the School Board and District Administration were looking at some larger capital facility needs of items such as boiler replacements and large roofing replacements coming on the near horizon. Knowing the cost of these projects would outstrip the current capital dollars over the next several years, it was decided to take the opportunity to create a long term plan for the community's schools.

Several things were done by the District to help them chart a future path.

1. They hosted 28 listening sessions with the general public and stakeholder groups to get their thoughts and ideas.
2. They completed facility, demographic and educational adequacy assessments to obtain an outside view of district needs.
3. They empowered a group of community citizens (along with school administrators), who spent over 400 volunteer hours to develop a long range plan that met the needs of the district and the community for the next several decades.

What did we learn along the way? From Superintendent Keith Hilts:

We learned the school district has done an excellent job taking care of our school facilities. We learned our schools are some of the most energy efficient around. We learned our district is debt free. We learned the district has had steady enrollment for the past decade and expect the same for the next decade.

But we also learned we have some significant space needs due to educational, security, special education, and mental health needs for our schools. For instance, when Lake Superior Elementary (LSE) was built in 1991, only half-day kindergarten was offered. This meant that classrooms could be used twice per day. Now, with kindergarten changing to a whole day model, twice as many kindergarten classrooms are needed. Additionally, teaching methods and concepts have changed over the years. New educational facilities designed today have a much different layout, look and feel compared to our current facilities. In addition, the need for special education spaces has grown substantially over the years. Our facilities were not designed for this need.

In addition, the district has initiated project-based learning charter schools in our schools to offer a unique educational experience not traditionally offered by the public school system that is desired by many families in our community. This model of education has attracted several new families to our district. Without this offering, many families may choose other education locations or methods outside the district or just feel or sense they are not receiving the education they want for their children. The end result is charter schools are here to stay, but again, they require additional space, not designed or accounted for in the original design of our facilities.

In addition, the Marengo Valley School enrollment continues to grow to where it now requires two sections per grade level and needs additional classrooms and core spaces added to provide the space it needs for the next few decades.

Our district and region are experiencing significant mental health needs. We have experienced several tragic events in our community and the district is receiving grants to help with funding some much needed programs, but additional school spaces are needed to administer them. In addition, we need to make our high school classroom area and commons areas more welcoming and inviting for our students, with more natural daylight as we know the physical learning environment has a significant impact on learning and on self-esteem.

We also learned all of our schools need to improve security. New single, secure entries for each school will allow for better control over who is allowed in our schools during the school day.

Lastly, the community shared an overwhelming desire for a field house to be used by the district and the community. The field house would help Ashland be a regional hub for recreation events while providing a safe place for children after school and on weekends. It would be utilized by the community for health and wellness.

The school board and administration, welcomed the plan from the task force that addressed the concerns described above. The School Board also continued to get feedback from the teaching staff and community to further strengthen and clarify the final plan for referendum. Details of the plan can be found on the district website.

Financial Overview:

The tax impact on a \$100,000 home is estimated to be \$9.83 per month if the referendum is approved by voters. The total amount the school board is asking to borrow is \$34,360,000. Due to the high poverty of the community, the referendum debt payments will be reimbursed by an estimated 46% in the form of state aid from the State of Wisconsin. The projected tax impact for debt assumes a conservative municipal lending rate estimate of 3.75%, with debt amortized over 20 years.

With interest rates at near record lows, The School Board is giving the voters the opportunity to decide if they support the School Board and Community Task Force's plan for the future of the District. The community has the opportunity to address our safety, educational space, facility maintenance, and community needs for the foreseeable future.