

Minnesotans reject school bond issues at highest rate in years

Only a quarter of the year's bond requests have passed.

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School bond issues have not done well at polling places this year. KYNDELL HARKNESS, STAR TRIBUNE FILE

Minnesota voters are shooting down school bond issues at the highest rate in years, with five out of six referendums rejected last week alone.

In the Sauk Rapids-Rice school district, voters said no to a new elementary school and other projects. In the Pierz district, they voted against adding a new gymnasium, turning an old band room into a cafeteria and other upgrades.

And in St. Francis, taxpayers said no to renovations that would have put them on the hook for as much as \$107 million — among the largest bonding amounts requested this year.

Across the state since January, at least 16 school districts have sought voter permission to sell bonds to fund renovation or construction projects. Just four requests have passed.

“This is the worst year for bonds I’ve seen,” said Greg Abbott, a spokesman with the Minnesota School Boards Association.

In fact, the 25 percent success rate marks the lowest in the 17 years the association has been tracking bond issue data. Most years, between 40 and 60 percent have passed, data show.

In rural districts, the reason may be rooted in tax burdens falling heavily on farmers, Abbott said. A plan that passed the Legislature and is awaiting Gov. Mark Dayton’s signature or veto would ease that burden by cutting school construction taxes on farmland.

Central Minnesota landowners faced a Pierz public schools referendum last week without a sense of what that plan’s fate would be.

“Some of the ag folks feel like they’ve had a rough few years in the ag industry, and it’s a difficult time for us to ask them to give a lot,” Pierz Superintendent George Weber said.

The district was asking for more than \$18 million, its first big bonding request since building an elementary school in 1992, Weber said.

Open enrollment may have also been a sticking point for some voters, he said. Residents can be leery of shouldering a tax hike to benefit students outside of the district.

But the failed bonding requests may hint at broader feelings that stretch beyond specific districts, school officials say.

“There is just a lot of anti-tax sentiment right now,” Weber said. “It’s pretty huge.”

‘Enough is enough’

Closer to the metro, voters in Anoka and southern Isanti counties cited higher taxes as a key reason to shoot down two bond referendum questions May 23.

Early results showed that the first question for facility renovations at St. Francis Public Schools failed with 55 percent opposing. The second question, which pitched a community activities center at the high school, was rejected by an even larger percentage.

If both questions had passed, owners of a \$150,000 home, the median value, could have paid about \$100 more a year in property taxes, according to district estimates.

The plans drew opposition from some city leaders in the weeks leading up to the special election.

During an Oak Grove City Council meeting this month, Mayor Mark Korin said “somebody has got to stand up and say enough is enough.”

Korin said he felt the district's plan lacked clarity and left too many details in question before the vote.

"I don't think anybody that voted against the referendum is against children," Korin said in an interview Thursday. "What I want to know is, how much of that money that we're spending is actually going in the classrooms?"

District officials say they did dozens of outreach meetings and presentations to explain why the projects were needed, including safety updates at entrances and their plan to get rid of portable classrooms from the 1970s.

"Waiting to address those needs in the future will end up costing more money," said Lisa Rahn, the district's community education director.

With potential referendums still to come, Abbott said the statewide passing rate could rebound.

"It's trying to figure out that line of what you really need and what the community can afford," Abbott said. "That's a really tough line to walk."

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