

Voters Reject \$100 Million St. Francis School Board Referendum

The school board didn't even have a budget for how to spend the money if they'd gotten it.

By **Anders Koskinen** - May 24, 2017



OAK GROVE, Minn. – Voters resoundingly rejected two proposals put forward by Independent School District 15 that would have approved \$107.8 million in bonding along with property tax increases to fund the bonding.

Voters **were faced** with one question asking for \$92.28 million for “acquisition and betterment of school facilities.” Voters **rejected** that proposal by a margin of 2501 to 2013, or 55.4 percent of voters. The second question asked for \$15.52 million for the construction of a community center as an attachment to St. Francis High School. That proposal failed 1730 to 2778, with only 38.4 percent of ballot cast favoring the project.

“There is not one person who voted against [the referendum] that is against children,” Oak Grove Mayor Mark Korin said, “What they’re opposed to is the way they abuse the referendum in an off year.”

Korin was a major voice of opposition to the referendum. Oak Grove is one of a few cities covered by Independent School District 15 (ISD15), along with St. Francis, Bethel, East Bethel, and parts of surrounding municipalities.

The school board's proposal lacked any concrete budgeting when it was presented to the Oak Grove City Council according to Korin. He said the board spoke mainly in generalities and platitudes, and did not plan to have specifics for spending the money nailed down until after the referendum had been approved.

"We are doing a disservice by throwing money at a school before knowing exactly where we are gonna spend it," Korin said, "They're going to put together a blue ribbon panel to decide where that money goes. Well that's just ludicrous. It may be normal for government operation, but I'm not gonna stand for it."

Despite the emphatic rejection of these two school board spending questions, Korin is confident that more referendums will be coming. School districts in Minnesota are able to choose the date and place of referendums, giving them a sort of home field advantage according to Korin.

"The school district just choose to have it where they want, to me having it on a holiday week coming up, having it on a non-typical voting place, voting time, voting month is just to minimize the involvement of people," Korin said, "It'll be another two years and they'll come back with another referendum, and again, and again, and again. It just never ends."

ISD 15 hired ICS Consulting to handle the referendum. ICS would have received in the range of two to 2.5 percent of construction costs if the referendum had passed. Since ISD 15 was nonspecific with their budget proposal, it is unknown how much money ICS Consulting lost out on.