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Emmetsburg Community Provides Input on Bond Referendum, Facility Needs at West Elementary

ECSD residents will consider approving debt levy ballot measure on March 4

EMMETSBURG, IOWA — Residents of the Emmetsburg Community School District recently provided feedback regarding the general obligation bond referendum in November 2024 that sought voter approval for the construction of a new elementary school.

The anonymous survey was available January 22-February 2. It asked a series of questions related to the district's facility needs at West Elementary School and the proposal last fall to replace the aging school with a \$29.75 million facility for students in grades PK-4. The proposed new school would have accommodated 21st century learning, had a safe pick-up and drop-off area, and provided space for future expansion.

A report detailing the community survey's results is available at <https://bit.ly/ecsdbondsurveyresults>.

"We want to thank everyone who took time to complete the survey and make their voices heard about last November's bond referendum," said Superintendent Cory Jenness. "Engaging with the community is a priority for the School Board and administration as the district explores possible options to address the challenges our students and staff face at West Elementary."

More than 50% of the votes in last November's election favored the district's proposal to construct a new 65,000 square-foot elementary school at an undeveloped site east of Iowa Lakes Community College. However, the state of Iowa requires a supermajority of 60% for bond measures to be approved.

The oldest portion of West Elementary was constructed 73 years ago. Among the challenges that exist today are outdated HVAC, plumbing, and electrical systems; old and damaged windows, flooring, and fixtures; classrooms that are not conducive for modern and collaborative learning; and lack of a secure pickup and dropoff area, among others.

Approximately 98% of the survey's 265 respondents said they are very familiar or somewhat familiar with the facility issues at West Elementary, while 81% said they agree that the issues need to be addressed now.

When asked why they believe the bond referendum in November 2024 was not approved by 60% of voters, the reason most cited by survey participants was the projected tax increase.

The original estimated tax impact of the November 2024 bond referendum was \$2.54 per \$1,000 of taxable property value. ECSD officials now believe that the construction of a new elementary school can be completed with a tax impact of \$1.85 per \$1,000. The lower rate is attributed to the district

refinancing a bond used to build the middle school and expecting to retire that debt one year early, saving ECSD taxpayers more than \$450,000 worth of interest payments.

ECSD's cumulative tax levy rate has declined by 12.9% since 2011.

"The School Board heard the concerns about property taxes associated with the bond referendum, which is reflected in a new tax impact for the elementary school project," Jenness said.

Another common reason mentioned by survey participants was the proposed location of a new elementary school on undeveloped property east of Iowa Lakes Community College.

According to Jenness, the district explored several potential locations throughout Emmetsburg—including land near the community college, the hospital, and north of College Street. However, [the 24-acre site](#) ultimately chosen by the board was ideal when considering its size, availability, cost, and proximity to other district facilities.

"Maintaining the neighborhood feel and walkability for elementary students was a very important consideration, and this site stood out as the clear front runner," Jenness said. "The proposed location for the school would also be accessible by the bike trail."

ECSD residents will go to the polls on Tuesday, March 4, to vote on a proposed measure that would allow the district to raise its debt service levy limit to \$4.05 per \$1,000 of taxable property value. Although the construction of an elementary school would only require an estimated \$1.85 per \$1,000 of taxable property value, state law requires the \$4.05 ceiling to be on the ballot.

Approving the debt service levy measure in March would not raise property taxes. A tax increase would only occur if voters approve a future general obligation bond referendum.

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