



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Operational Referendum | April 1, 2025

Background:

The New Lisbon School District must address critical challenges by repairing or replacing essential building systems in its school while investing in experienced, quality staff, to maintain optimal class sizes and programs to develop well-educated, self-reliant, ethical, and involved citizens equipped to succeed and contribute in a changing world.

We are facing two primary challenges:

- **Lack of funding:** State funding has not kept up with increasing costs. In addition, funding that New Lisbon-area voters approved in 2022 will expire in 2026. Without another operational referendum, the District will have to consider significant reductions to programs and services for students.
- **Maintenance of facilities:** In 2022, local voters approved a referendum to pay for a portion of the needed roofing repairs, HVAC, parking lot, and technology updates. Other potential projects were not completed at that time to reduce the tax impact on our residents. Those projects are increasingly important.

This FAQ provides essential information about how the referendum will address critical facility needs that will contribute to the sustainable long-term success of the district.

1. What is the New Lisbon School District proposing?

After thorough discussion, and consideration of community input via a community-wide survey, the Board voted unanimously to place a non-recurring, 4-year operational referendum on the April 1, 2025 ballot.

2. What is the referendum question that will be on the ballot?

BE IT RESOLVED by the School Board of the School District of New Lisbon, Juneau, and Monroe Counties, Wisconsin that the revenues included in the School District budget be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Section 121.91, Wisconsin Statutes, by \$1,950,000 a year for four years beginning with the 2026-2027 school year and ending with the 2029-2030 school year, for non-recurring purposes consisting of ongoing educational programming and maintenance of facilities and grounds.

3. What is an operating referendum?

An operating referendum asks permission from voters for the District to exceed the state-imposed revenue cap to generate funds for operating purposes. Operating referendums may be one-time (non-recurring) or recurring (annually for a set dollar amount.)

- Recurring referendums only have to be asked/passed once. It recurs every year.
- Non-Recurring referendums are for a certain dollar amount for a certain number of years. They “expire” at the end of the number of years that the voters authorized them.



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4. Why is the District seeking approval of an operational referendum on April 1, 2025?

New Lisbon School District **does not have sustainable, predictable, stable funding** within the state-established revenue limits. While we have made cuts where possible (including eliminating two teaching positions and reducing employee benefit costs), we are concerned about how further cuts would negatively impact students. Therefore, the district is asking voters to renew the operational referendum at \$1.95 million each for four years beginning in 2026 and ending in 2030 to Funds will be used for two purposes:

- Continuing current educational programs and services.
- Address critical maintenance of facilities:
 - Roofs over 25 years old
 - Investigate water damage, and repair as much as possible.

5. What is the projected school tax impact for the operational referendum?

The proposed non-recurring operational referendum of \$1.95 million per year for four years is estimated to increase taxes by approximately \$1.36 per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

6. We just passed a referendum in 2022, why do we have to pass another?

First, there are two types of operating referendums: recurring and non-recurring. New Lisbon has a voter-approved, non-recurring referendum. It expires at the end of the 2025-26 school year. To avoid a gap in funding, we are seeking another four-year referendum.

7. Why go out to referendum a year early?

New Lisbon's current four-year referendum will expire at the end of the 2025 - 2026 school year. Planning for the next school year begins as early as winter 2025. We are asking voters to approve the continuation of funding: The referendum on the April 1, 2025 ballot would go into effect July 1, 2026, when the existing referendum expires. This is important for several reasons:

1. **Fiscal stewardship and long-term planning:** To be good fiscal stewards, long-term planning is essential. If the referendum passes, we know what projects to schedule, and we can make better financial decisions on contracts, what to repair and what to replace, etc.
2. **Avoid program reductions and staff lay-offs during a time of open-enrollment and staff shortages.** If we do not have funding secured for the 2026-2027 school year by early spring 2026, there may be budget cuts, leaving families and staff feeling insecure. This leads to a loss of enrollment and a loss of staff. There is a teacher shortage across the state.



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3. **Limited opportunities to ask the voters:** It is typical to run a referendum during a regular election cycle before the current referendum expires. If the referendum did not pass in April 2025, we would likely try again in April 2026. However, if the referendum failed in April 2026 there would be no turning back. Whatever needs to be done would have to start immediately as funding expires two months later.

8. Why is New Lisbon asking for more money than Royall and Mauston have in the past?

First, every Wisconsin school district's funding formula is different because each district has its unique enrollment, property values, etc.

Royall and Mauston have both gone out for capital referendums in recent years. They took care of most of their building repairs and maintenance through these capital referendums, and then sought voter approval for operating funds only:

- Mauston - 1.75 Million per year for operational costs
- Royall - 1.5 Million per year for operational costs

In New Lisbon, we have combined our deferred maintenance projects and operating costs into one operational referendum. That is why the dollar amount requested is higher than our neighbors: We have combined operating and deferred maintenance into one operational question.

9. Why do school districts have to go to the referendum?

There is a funding gap in Wisconsin school districts. That is why over 80% of school districts ask voters for additional funding through referendums. In New Lisbon, to continue the same programs and services for students that we currently have, and for critical facility repair to the school, the Board of Education is seeking an operating referendum.

State funding has not kept pace with expenses. School Districts have always had to go to referendum for capital referendums to issue debt for large building projects. School Districts generally go to operating referendum when state funding is not keeping up with the rising costs of operating a school, the school district must ask their voters to make up the difference to maintain the same level of education they already provide.



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10. Will referendums always be required to fund schools?

Revenue limits have been in effect since 1993-1994 - that's over 30 years. Although the state increased the revenue limit the past two school years, and we are very thankful for that, it does not come close to providing the amount of funding that the district has been shorted over the past 10-plus years. Rising costs have hit everyone hard, especially in the past four years. School Districts are not immune to all of these rising costs.

If school funding was still tied to increases in inflation, the school district would have an additional 1.9 million this year, and that is not counting all of the previous years. Without funding equal to inflation we operate with a deficit.

Reductions in expenses year after year impact our ability to teach students. To keep reductions as far from students as possible, we delay needed building maintenance and purchasing of textbooks and other important purchases to make ends meet - or balance the budget. We cannot budget "cut" our way out of the gap year after year, or put off these repairs and purchases forever, without significantly impacting the quality of the school district.

11. Does an approved referendum take care of all the District's needs, for at least four years?

No. However, keeping the doors open is the priority, which can be accomplished with a successful operational referendum.

We have an estimated \$40,144,000.00 of total building needs, and high-priority needs that are estimated to total \$28,233,000.00, including:

- HVAC
- Roofing
- Masonry and Building Envelope Work (select sections to investigate water damage)
- Doors/Windows
- Secure Entrance
- Non-ADA compliant including playground
- Plumbing/Restrooms
- Lighting Efficiency

Large-scale building maintenance needs have been deferred over many years because of budget reductions. These needs exist. The District will likely need to borrow money for the large-scale items. This too would require a referendum. That would likely be in the form of a capital referendum, which asks voters to approve borrowing for large-scale items.

12. How are school districts funded in Wisconsin?

A majority of all school districts' revenue is controlled by the state via a formula called the revenue limit. The purpose of the revenue limit is to cap - or limit - the amount of money a district generates from the two largest sources of school funding (revenue). These sources are state equalization aid and property taxes. However, total revenue may not exceed the limit set by the state formula unless a referendum is approved by the voters.



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13. What if the state improves funding for K-12 Education?

The New Lisbon School District has three financial goals:

- A balanced budget that supports the current program and services
- Maintain the district's buildings and grounds
- Maintain a fund balance of approximately 25% which avoids or minimizes short-term borrowing and resulting interest charges.

If the state of Wisconsin increases K-12 education funding, that would mean that the school district would not need the full \$1.95 million per year to reach these three goals. The Board of Education would levy only the amount needed to balance the budget, maintain programs and services, and sustain the fund balance. We will ask voters to approve anything that goes beyond our needs in a separate referendum or question.

14. Will the district keep proposing referendums until one passes, and will the amount requested keep increasing?

The needs don't go away. This referendum addresses critical needs through a transparent and responsible process. If a referendum does not pass, the Board will likely return to the voters in 2026 and ask again. Any future proposal would address priorities and current needs.

15. What happens if the referendum doesn't pass?

If not approved, the Board will likely return with another request in April 2026, but reductions may already have begun. If denied again, our options are: significant program cuts, more deferred maintenance, and consideration for consolidation or dissolution.

The district is committed to maintaining transparency and will continue to engage with the community to make informed decisions.

16. How do I apply for an absentee ballot?

Any eligible Wisconsin voter who wishes to cast a ballot may do so either in person during the early voting period, by mail, using an absentee ballot, or in person at their polling place on April 1, 2025. For information about voting, visit [MyVote.wi.gov](https://myvote.wi.gov).

17. Where can I get more information about the referendum?

- Visit the district website.
- Attend a public information meeting:
 - February 5, 1:00 pm @ NL Memorial Public Library
 - February 5, 3:30 pm @ NL IMC (Staff Session)
 - February 25, 5:30 pm @ NL School Library (IMC)
 - March 18, 5:30 pm @ NL School Library (IMC)
- Email Scott Hickey, Superintendent: s.hickey@nlsd.k12.wi.us