



FAQ Regarding District 97's Referenda

On April 4, 2017, District 97 will ask the voters of Oak Park to consider the passage of two referenda questions that will enable us to:

- Navigate the continued financial instability and uncertainty at the state level
- Overcome the lower than anticipated property tax increases that are constrained by the tax cap laws
- Ensure we have the resources we need to support a burgeoning student population
- Aid the long-term viability of our schools
- Help advance our vision for creating a positive learning environment for all students that is equitable, inclusive and focused on the whole child.

The first question calls for a one percent limiting rate increase totaling approximately \$13.3 million and the second calls for the issuance of \$57.5 million in school building bonds.

Below are responses to some of the frequently asked questions about the referenda.

Why did the district decide to run two referenda?

We decided to place two referenda questions on the ballot so we could more clearly communicate both the purpose and goals associated with each one. In addition, going with two questions allowed us to make the minimum ask for each category (operating funds and infrastructure) and avoid commingling the funds. With that said, we view them as interdependent and equally important to the future of our students, our schools and our community.

How did the district determine the size of the referenda?

The district carefully studied and assessed several internal (e.g., budgets, salaries, class sizes, staff ratios, school fees, etc.) and external factors (e.g., enrollment, inflation, state mandates, new property growth, state and federal funding, etc.) when deciding both the size and type of referendum to seek. We also used a range of data and inputs for many of these factors in order to produce estimates and assumptions for future revenue and costs.

The size of the operating fund increase was ultimately driven by the goal of reaching a target fund balance of at least 25 percent five years out from the referenda. By doing so, we would:

Have financial flexibility/stability if state and federal funding shortfalls continue.

- Maintain service, staffing and programming levels and be able to invest in the advancement of the district's vision.
- Regain compliance with board policy and the Illinois State Board of Education guidelines regarding fund balance levels.

With these goals in mind, the board ultimately settled on a one percent limiting rate increase, which would enable the district to reach a fund balance of 27 percent by 2022.

The capital facilities bond referendum was sized to:

- Address the capacity issues at Holmes, Lincoln and Longfellow.

- Enable us to perform maintenance and repair to support the safety, core functionality and sustainability of our buildings for the next 20 years (roof repairs, boiler repairs, plumbing repairs, fire alarm upgrades, etc.).
- Improve building accessibility across the district.
- Implement year-round temperature control management and maintenance in our elementary schools.
- Invest in the modernization of classrooms.
- Promote transparency by restricting the use of the funds for capital purposes.
- Best support the advance planning of capital work, which reduces cost and program disruption.
- Help capture lower interest rates.
- Allow for a lower operating rate.
- Provide the best option for smoothing the tax rates across 1999 bonds payoff.

What role did the state’s ongoing financial issues play in the decision to seek the referenda?

State funding currently accounts for approximately 19 percent of the district’s revenue, more than 11 percent of which is General State Aid. Since 2012, the state has only been making partial General State Aid payments on an annual basis, which has cost our schools approximately \$9 million in anticipated revenue to date. Based on our current operating spending per pupil, we could educate nearly 650 children in a year with those funds. Since Illinois continues to operate without a state budget, and there is no clear plan for ending the stalemate between legislators, the only viable solution for addressing this issue, as well as offsetting the challenges created by a historic surge in enrollment and lower than anticipated annualized property tax increases, was to run these referenda.

It is also important to note that the Illinois State Board of Education’s advisory board recommended a foundation level that, if it had been implemented, would have resulted in a \$16 million per year increase to state funding. If this had happened, we would not have needed to make cuts or run an operating rate referendum. We also would have been able to abate a portion of the necessary capital payments.

Why are so many of the reductions focused on music, art and foreign language?

If the two referenda questions do not pass on April 4, the [district will need to make more than \\$14 million in cuts to staff, programming and overall operations over the course of those three years](#) to achieve a fund balance of 15 percent (10 percent below the level that is required by board policy and recommended by the Illinois State Board of Education) and balance our budget. While we tried to keep these reductions as far away from the classroom as possible, 80 percent of our budget covers the salaries and benefits for the more than 750 people who work on behalf of our district and community. As a result, if the referenda fail, there was no way for us to reach the fund balance and budgetary goals necessary to support the basic baseline needs of our schools and students without impacting instruction. Since the state requires public school districts to administer specific core courses, including physical education, we had to make the difficult decision to put programs, positions and initiatives on our reductions list that are considered “non-mandatory,” but play an important and valuable role in the education of the more than 6,000 children we serve.

Why did you invest money in the construction of the administration building if you knew you would need to run these referenda?

The building at 970 Madison Street was purchased by District 97 in the 1970s and was intended to be a short-term solution when we first occupied the space. However, the district decided to forgo moving or investing any significant dollars into fixing the building for decades so the money could be used for the schools. This resulted in the building becoming outdated and increasingly more inefficient as time went on. When we reached the point where we could no longer delay making necessary repairs (roof, HVAC, electrical, etc.), we determined we would need to invest nearly \$3 million to extend the life of the facility by approximately five years. In addition, these repairs would have triggered mandatory building code and accessibility requirements that would have required even more money to fix.

The district, with the help of its citizen-led finance and facilities committees, determined that spending the money on the construction of a new building versus the existing structure was a better short and long-term investment. It would also help accomplish three goals:

- Reduce the ongoing operating costs for the administration building in order to save money that could be invested in our educational programs.
- Reserve debt capacity for our schools by not issuing any debt to pay for the administration building.
- Provide development opportunities for Madison Street that would increase new growth revenue. This new growth revenue would help fund student learning.

The Village of Oak Park agreed to a one-time payout of \$6.3 million in dollars from the Madison Street TIF to help fund the project primarily because the construction of the building aligned with its Madison Street Plan. This payout would not have been granted for any use other than this project. Furthermore, if the district had pursued the dissolution of the TIF to free up the money to fund operations, we would have lost approximately 46 percent of those dollars under the existing state funding formula. We also would have impacted the opportunity for new growth along Madison Street.

Lastly, the decision to build the new facility will benefit our schools and community in several ways:

- The new building was constructed to be more energy efficient, which we estimate will result in cost savings in the years to come.
- The sale of the administration building and warehouse will aid commercial development on Madison Street and expand the tax base for Oak Park.
- The new facility is a more effective district and community resource because of the increased amount of available conference and collaboration space. We have held nearly 500 internal and external meetings or professional development trainings since the building opened in October of 2016.
- The intergovernmental agreement with the Village included a provision to relocate our buildings and grounds department to the Village's Public Works facility under a 40-year rent-free arrangement that will result in long-term operational savings for the district.
- The decision to move to 260 Madison Street versus making significant and costly repairs to the building at 970 Madison Street resulted in a net savings of approximately \$1 million. It also did not produce any long-term debt or diminish our educational programs.

Why are we spending money on air conditioning now when it was deemed to be too expensive in the past?

While the installation of air conditioning would be part of the proposed capital improvements if the referenda pass, our primary focus is on improving overall temperature control and maintenance in our buildings throughout the year.

The research and outreach we conducted in 2013 showed that it would have cost at least \$15 million to \$16 million to add air conditioning to all eight of our elementary schools. However, this would not have addressed the issues related to year-round temperature control and maintenance, which we estimate would have increased the cost of this endeavor to between \$20 million and \$30 million.

We are pursuing this solution at this time because most of the work and cost (all but \$5 million) associated with this project will be carried out and covered in conjunction with the other maintenance work we will perform if the referenda pass.

What investments did you make with the money from the 2011 referendum?

During a forum held on November 18, 2010, the district presented the community with information regarding the referendum we were seeking in spring 2011. This information included investments that would be made in

schoolyards, the music program, technology, etc. if the referendum passed. People can access a [copy of this presentation by clicking here](#).

Below are examples of the investments that were made following the successful passage of the referendum in 2011.

- Upgrades to the schoolyards at all eight elementary schools. These upgrades included the installation of new playground equipment at every building and a turf field at Irving. They also included the installation of a turf field at Irving, which was the result of a partnership with the Park District and several local organizations.
- Improvement of the green space at the two middle schools, which included the installation of turf fields at both buildings thanks to a partnership with the Park District and several local organizations.
- The implementation of a 1:1 technology initiative, which included enhancements to the district's wireless network, expansion of the district's bandwidth, improvements to the district's technology infrastructure, the purchase and deployment of teacher and student devices, the purchase and implementation of the PowerSchool technology platform/student information system, and the purchase and implementation of a voice over IP system.
- Improvements in accessibility, which included installing an elevator at Whittier Elementary School that enabled us to house all of our early childhood classrooms in one location.
- Replacement of the outdated classroom furniture at all eight elementary schools.
- The purchase of string, wind and percussion instruments, as well as digital keyboards/pianos, for the district's music program.

What has the district done in the area of fiscal stewardship since the 2011 referendum?

Below are several examples of the efforts the district has undertaken in the area of fiscal stewardship since the successful passage of the referendum in 2011. There are additional examples in the response to the next question about how we compare to our peer districts.

- On both a total cost and per-student basis, District 97 has consistently maintained expenditures below budget and referendum commitments.
- Through the implementation of the new printer copier solution and phone system and the use of e-rate, we are estimated to save approximately \$900,000 over an eight-year period (2013-2014 to 2020-2021).
- The district has saved money through our various intergovernmental agreements, which include, but are not limited to, the ones we have with the Park District for the maintenance of our fields, OPRF High school for the management of our food services and the Village of Oak Park for the construction of our administration building.
- The districts' citizen-led Financial Oversight and Review Committee (FORC) has continued to serve as an independent advisor on our finances, expenditures, revenues, budgets, and fiscal policies and decision-making.
- The district has received the highest "unqualified/unmodified" audit rating from our outside accountants for the past four years, which reflects no internal control or compliance deficiencies. These audits are

performed to ensure that financial statements are materially correct and are in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles.

- The district's current credit rating is Aa2, which is among the highest in the state.
- The district has developed strong fiscal policies that govern the use of debt, feature tight risk tolerance for investments, and include a fund balance target policy that has both a floor (25%) and a ceiling (50%). We recently lowered the ceiling from 75 percent to 50 percent so an abatement benefitting taxpayers would be triggered if we received any unanticipated revenue from a source like the state.

How does District 97 compare to its peer districts?

In 2014, the district's Finance Oversight and Review Committee developed a list of 18 peer districts in Illinois that could be utilized to provide an objective reference standard when benchmarking our performance/efforts in a variety of different areas (e.g., financial, academic, policy, etc.). The districts on this list were selected based on several variables/criteria that included:

- County
- District type
- Number of students
- EAV per student
- Percent of low income students

People can access the [list of peer districts, as well as information regarding the methodology, variables and criteria used to select them, by clicking here](#). Below are examples of how District 97 compares with our peer districts in several academic and financial categories.

- District 97 has consistently performed above the state average and average of our peer districts in reading and math over the past 10 years.
- The average operating expenditures per pupil among our peer districts is \$13,014. District 97 was at \$13,923 for FY15, which was within seven percent of the average.
- The average salaries and benefits per pupil among our peer districts is \$10,436. District 97 was at \$10,852 for FY15, which was within four percent of the average.
- The five-year annualized percent change in District 97's operating expenditures per pupil from 2010 to 2015 was 0.9 percent. Nearly 74 percent of our peer districts were above one percent during that time period, and the median for those districts was 1.9 percent. During that same time, District 97's enrollment grew at twice that rate.
- District 97's long-term debt per student for FY15 was \$4,193. Nearly 58 percent of our peer districts were above \$10,000. If the capital referendum passes, and all \$57.5 million of bonds are sold, we would still rank 11th or 12th among our peer districts in long-term debt per student.

People can access [information about how we compare to our peer districts in these categories by clicking here](#).

What benefits or savings will the district and community realize from the teachers' contract that was implemented during the 2014-15 school year?

Prior to entering into the current contract/agreement, there was an unsustainable annual cost growth rate of between 4.5 percent and five percent. However, the all-in expense growth rate is now 2.6 percent. Below are several of the other key outcomes from the contract/agreement.

Compensation

- Establishment of a sustainable compensation structure that:
 - Provides District 97 students with continued access to high-quality educators.

- Creates a fair and equitable system for paying teachers.
 - Continues to recognize the importance and value of continuing education and externally validated endorsements and certifications.
 - Aligns with the district's history of sound, fiscal management.
 - Supports the district's 2011 referendum promise to reduce annual growth.
- Replacement of traditional steps and lanes (25 steps with 8 lanes) with a compressed salary schedule featuring four bands and five recognitions that emphasize teacher effectiveness. These recognitions include earning one or two master's degrees, a doctorate, and endorsements from the Illinois State Board of Education that are attained through the successful completion of coursework and the passage of tests and are added to a teacher license. They also include obtaining National Board Certification, which is widely considered the most respected professional certification in education.
 - Elimination of automatic increases for any teacher who receives a summative evaluation of unsatisfactory or needs improvement.
 - Increase in the reimbursement for tuition, including cover the costs associated with pre-approved coursework and fees associated with pursuing National Board Certification.
 - Introduction of a higher average starting salary, which will align District 97 more closely with other districts in the area and help it attract and retain highly qualified and skilled teachers from diverse backgrounds in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Retirement

- Creation of a 403(b) plan, which includes a 50 percent district match up to a maximum of two percent for all teachers. The plan offers greater stability given the uncertainty of the Illinois Teacher Retirement System (TRS), and will enable the teachers to diversify their retirement funds.
- Sunset (discontinuation) of the 4x6 retirement option (four consecutive years with a six percent increase to salary base).
- Addition of a post-retirement payment provision that will recognize teachers who retire with decades of service, but are not eligible for the 4x6 option. This provision, which will feature declining payouts for individuals who are retiring through 2024, will sunset following the completion of the 2023-2024 school year.

Insurance

- Transition from a system where the district contributed a set percentage based on the type of plan (e.g., PPO, HMO, etc.) to one where the district will contribute a set dollar amount based on the type of coverage (e.g., single, family, etc.).
- Equal split between the district and individual OPTA members of the cost of an annual premium increase on any plan that is greater than seven percent. District will fully cover any annual premium increase up to seven percent regardless of the type of plan.

Could District 97 borrow or request a transfer of funds from District 200?

A similar question was posed during the 2011 referendum. At that time, we talked to our attorneys about the feasibility of this concept. They informed us that governing bodies could not legally conduct these types of transfers. The laws governing this issue have not changed since 2011.

What is the potential net cost/impact of the District 97 referenda and the recent triennial reassessments released by the Cook County Assessor's Office?

Oak Park Township Assessor Ali ElSaffar recently wrote two articles regarding this issue that were published by the local newspapers. Below are links to those articles.

- [Article published on March 7, 2017](#)
- [Article published on March 14, 2017](#)

Would these referenda still be needed if TIFs were not diverting money away from the schools?

District 97 has always worked proactively with the Village of Oak Park to create intergovernmental agreements that would mitigate the impact of TIFs on our schools.

While some people believe the district would benefit from ending the TIFs, the fact is that we would have received less net revenue if the downtown and Madison Street TIFs were dissolved following the referendum in 2011. For example, we participated in the arbitration that resulted from the lawsuit District 200 filed in conjunction with the downtown TIF. The settlement agreement that was reached led to a "virtual dissolution" of this TIF. The TIF district now pays a surplus distribution of all TIF dollars collected, with the exception of the debt that existed prior to the settlement agreement and money for certain properties. So, for the most recent tax year (2015, which was collected in calendar year 2016), District 97 received about \$2 million of surplus payments from the TIF.

If the TIF had been dissolved prior to the agreement, District 97 would have received approximately \$2.4 million, but would have lost approximately \$1.1 million of General State Aid because the state would have deemed Oak Park to be a more property rich community. In addition, while we would have still netted \$1.3 million, the Village would have likely needed to raise taxes by approximately \$1.8 million to cover its previously issued debt. Fortunately, under the current agreement, we netted \$2 million and the Village to has been able to pay for its debt from TIF funds instead of tax increases.

General State Aid funding for District 97 interacts with local property taxes and TIFs in a complex and non-intuitive way. During its meeting on November 15, 2016 meeting, the Board of Education received a [presentation about the interaction between state funding and TIFs that can be accessed by clicking here](#).

How do you respond to concerns from the community about how the money from the referenda will be spent when the district decided to purchase Fast ForWord following the referendum in 2011?

In 2011, District 97 conducted a comprehensive study and assessment of the Fast ForWord program over an eight-month period to determine if it would contribute to the long-term growth and success of our students, especially when used as an intervention for those individuals who were struggling, were at risk and/or had special needs. People can access [information about the various activities that were undertaken in conjunction with this study and assessment, which included a pilot program offered at Beye and Hatch elementary schools, by clicking here](#).

Last year, the district performed a program audit with the help of a company called Cooney Collaborative. The purpose/goal of the audit was to evaluate the effectiveness of 15 supplemental curricular resources being used in our schools, including Fast ForWord. While Fast ForWord had helped some of our struggling students make progress (71 percent of students who participated in the pilot showed gains), and featured an annualized cost that was less than one percent of our total budget, it, along with a few other resources, did not produce the results we had hoped for or anticipated. As a result, we decided to discontinue their use. People can access a [cover memo about the audit by clicking here](#) and the [results of the audit by clicking here](#).

Although some of the programs we have utilized have not met our expectations, there are a number of others we have invested in that have had a positive impact on student learning, staff development and parent/guardian engagement. Below are examples of these programs. In addition, we have developed lists of proposed instructional and capital investments, [which can be accessed by clicking here](#), that were created, in part, based on the feedback from our students, families, faculty, staff and community members.

With that said, our work on projects such as the modernization of classrooms will be done with input and assistance from these same groups of people. We also have and will continue to work with our citizen-led advisory committees in the areas of finance, facilities, legislation and communication to make sound decisions that best serve our students, schools and community. For example, the board will be working with its Committee for Community Engagement to identify and implement strategies that will help increase interest and engagement in the work of the district; while Dr. Kelley will be participating in several community conversations this spring during which people will have the chance to share their views about the district's vision and help guide the work that will be done to support it moving forward.

Examples of Successful Program Investments

- The International Baccalaureate program at Brooks and Julian middle schools provides a framework for rigorous curriculum, creative problem solving, hands-on learning and global awareness. It offers a unified, consistent and focused approach to professional development; and creates a system for instruction that teachers can use to effectively overcome challenges and thrive in today's demanding academic environment. It will also help ensure that our middle school students are ready for high school and college and are prepared to compete in the 21st century workforce.
- The High Expectations Teaching professional development course designed by Research for Better Teaching focuses on a teacher's expectations and beliefs in the learner, and is aimed at helping educators improve their skill set in nurturing motivation. It offers teachers strategies they can use to maintain an environment for learning, and shows them how to organize their classroom and design and evaluate their lessons. It also highlights the high correlation between teacher expectation and student learning.
- Project Lead the Way is a project-based, middle school design program that introduces students to elements of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). It enables students to demonstrate creative and critical thinking and problem solving skills, develop time management skills and learn to meet project deadlines, experience and practice the professional code of conduct required in the hard sciences, and acquire an ability to cope with failure, learn from experience and try again.
- Second Step is a curriculum that teaches skills for learning, empathy, emotional management and problem solving. It has been implemented across the district this year to ensure that students have access to tiered positive behavior supports.

What do you mean when you talk about improving the accessibility of the schools?

At this time, only half of our schools are accessible in accordance with the requirements sets forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). We believe investing in improved accessibility across our schools will benefit students, staff members, parents/guardians and community members who have short-term, long-term and permanent mobility limitations. It will also make our buildings more viable resources for the various local organizations that use them on a regular basis.

It is important to note that any major renovations we undertake at our schools will automatically trigger accessibility requirements under ADA.

If the referenda do pass and we proceed with the capital improvements we have proposed, we will competitively bid all accessibility work, including the installation of elevators. This is our standard practice when undertaking any major capital projects.

There have been numerous references to the referenda helping to achieve the district's vision. What is the vision and how is it addressing the needs of students?

On July 12, 2016, the Board of Education adopted the following shared vision for the district.

Create a positive learning environment for all District 97 students that is equitable, inclusive and focused on the whole child.

This vision was developed over the course of several months by community members who engaged in a positive and productive dialogue with each other and the district about the preferred future we want for all of our students.

Below are updates on the work that has been completed to date in conjunction with the vision, as well as details about the activities the district will be undertaking going forward to help every child we serve learn, grow and achieve.

- *Multi Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)*. Our schools have Multi Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) teams to help each student attain our universal goals. MTSS includes dedicated staff members (e.g., language arts specialists, RtI leaders, PBIS coaches, etc.) and instructional resources (e.g., 95% Group, SLANT, Read 180, MobyMax, SPIRE, etc.) we can use to meet the unique academic, social and/or emotional needs of students.
- *Metrics for Success*. This fall, the district identified and defined the metrics that will be used to measure the advancement of our vision. These metrics include student progress made through MTSS, results from the PARCC and MAP assessments, student attendance, and data from the Education for the Future and Illinois 5Essentials surveys. We will also be utilizing qualitative data collected from students, faculty, staff, parents/guardians and community members.
- *Leadership Coaching*. All 10 of the district's building principals are receiving coaching from the National Equity Project, which is an organization whose mission is to "to dramatically improve educational experiences, outcomes, and life options for students and families who have been historically underserved by their schools and districts." All of the coaching activities will be tailored to meet the needs and complement the work of each individual school.
- *Student Voice*. The district is exploring ways to actively engage students in the advancement of our goals, while also giving them a more prominent role/voice in their learning on a day-to-day basis. We are looking at a variety of platforms (e.g., survey data, Student Council, membership on school and district-level committees, etc.) through which students will have the opportunity to share their thoughts, ideas and knowledge, and further develop the leadership skills that will contribute to their college and career readiness.
- *Consistent Curriculum*. We have implemented common curricular resources in science, writing and math across all eight of our elementary schools.
- *Data Conversations*. School-level leaders are conducting data conversations with grade level teams after each benchmark assessment (three times per year), as well as during the four to six week cycles that occur between these assessments. We are currently using district-level common cut scores to help us more consistency identify students in need of support. School and district-level staff members also have data conversations after each benchmark window (three times per year) to help monitor and aid student growth and attainment.

- *Structured Conversations about Student Progress.* Through the Formative Assessment for Results (FAR) process, we have increased the opportunities teachers have to engage in structured conversations about the progress of all of their students. During the FAR coaching session held in November 2016, Renee DeWald, who is serving as our trainer on this process, provided team leaders with resources they can use to help facilitate conversations on cultural competency at the team level. In addition, both of our middle schools offer a WIN period (What I Need). During this period, students have the opportunity to engage in enrichment or remediation activities. Students who receive Tier 2 and 3 interventions also have access to an enrichment period during the school year.