

District makes final payment on maintenance work loan that changed school officials' approach to borrowing

Just nine years after winning voter approval to borrow \$2.6 million, the Port Washington-Saukville School Board has repaid the loan and is free of referendum debt.

The district made its last payment of \$465,000 at the beginning of the month.

"This is terrific," Supt. Michael Weber said. "We have no referendum debt. There just aren't many districts in this situation.

"This is a milestone for me. In all the years I've been a superintendent (22), I've never been in a district that has made a final payment on its referendum debt until now."

The money was spent on a host of improvement projects throughout the district that included heating upgrades, a new Port Washington High School gym floor and a makeover of outdoor athletic facilities.

"For what we were able to accomplish with \$2.6 million, this was a good referendum," Weber said.

More than allowing the district to accomplish deferred maintenance projects, the referendum, and its failed predecessor, set the tone for the district for years to come. In November 2002, voters rejected a more costly referendum proposal. Stunned but determined to fund a more austere improvement initiative, school officials turned to their constituents for guidance.

"I remember walking through Harry's (restaurant) and people saying, 'OK, Patty, you asked for our input so you better sit down and talk with us for awhile,'" School Board President Patty Ruth said.

Board member Myron Praeger said, "We actually run our district the way we do today because we asked the community what it thought and we listened."

Five months after the referendum defeat, voters approved a revised borrowing plan and officials vowed to change the way they did business.

First, a School Board wary of saddling the district with long-term debt decided to repay the \$2.6 million in just nine years despite foreseeable financial challenges.

"To take such a short term on this amount of money really shows the fiscal responsibility of the board," Director of Business Services Jim Froemming said.

Then the board made good on a pledge Weber announced prior to the second referendum

PW-S board closes book on \$2.6 million referendum

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vote by creating a budget line item for building and grounds maintenance so the district would not have to ask voters again for permission to borrow for routine upgrades.

Today, the district has a \$200,000 maintenance fund and is considering increasing it to \$300,000.

“Eventually, we may need to go to referendum to take care of expensive projects like the replacement of roofs, but that’s a lot different than going to referendum to fund yearly maintenance,” Weber said.