

West survey says: Tell us more

- 17 percent undecided: Potential referendum likely on hold until April

By [Tim Wagner](#)
STAFF WRITER

AURORA — The results of a recent survey taken by the West Aurora School District carry a recurring theme: A substantial portion of taxpayers aren't ready to support a November referendum because they simply don't know exactly where their money will be spent.

Based on the data, which were released at Monday night's Board of Education meeting, district officials vowed they will regularly communicate their intentions with the community.

Pending future board approval, a referendum likely will not be on the ballot until April 2007.

"We will engage our community into more about what we're doing," said Superintendent Jim Rydland. "Feedback (from residents) will make a difference on how we make our decisions, and ultimately what decisions we make."

Of the 1,300 surveys completed, 46 percent of all respondents said "yes" to a 45- to 50-cent rate increase in order to maintain current programs and services, while 39 percent indicated they'd support an additional five-cent increase in order to fund the new teaching and learning initiative.

Those numbers clearly do not favor the passage of a referendum in November, but approximately 17 percent of those who responded said they "don't know" at this point how they would vote.

"That's higher than normal," said Pat Quinn, a representative from Wisconsin-based School Perceptions, the company that organized the survey. "(That means) a large number of people are interested in what you have to say, or are willing to listen to the data you have to give them."

Of those surveyed, 93 percent indicated they do usually vote in elections.

"We did not sense animosity," Quinn said. "(The survey) showed a real willingness to trust the current administration. ... We're very excited when we see that."

Board members seemed encouraged about the 17 percent "undecided" tally, and challenged district administrators to continue to keep the public informed about plans. Rydland said a "community outreach program" would be developed to assure residents their feedback is vital.

"We need to build a trust with the community and do a better job of communicating with them," said board member Laurie Hoffman.

Based on responses, which were all anonymous, some common themes included:

- There is a need for increased communication between the district and its residents.
- There is a perception that the district has been less than fully honest on certain issues in the past.
- The district does not need fancy buildings, or "Taj Mahal high schools," as one person wrote.

- A high school in North Aurora, presumably requested by those who live there, is needed.
- Current taxes are too high.

Board President Rick Slocum regarded the feedback as "constructive criticism," and that the district is responsible for "communicating back to the community (about) where we're going."

The superintendent's master plan, which includes implementing a district-wide gifted program, lengthening the school day, adding an extra learning period to make it seven per day at West High and enhancing the vocational and special education programs, revolves around the "Teaching and Learning Plan," much of which is under development.

"This isn't the end," said board member Sonni Herget. "Actually, it's just the beginning."

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