

## Voters say 'yes' to West referendum

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AURORA -- After a year's worth of listening and learning about the intricacies of their school district, taxpayers on Tuesday delivered their loudest response.

They said "yes" for West.

For the first time since 1988, the West Aurora School District passed an operating-rate referendum, in which voters narrowly approved a 50-cent tax hike referendum, enabling the district to remain out of debt and fix the financial foundation for the long term.

The referendum was decided by just 173 votes, with 4,608 residents approving, against 4,435 rejecting.

"It's a great day for the students of District 129, and it's a great day from the standpoint of our ability to move forward," Superintendent Jim Rydland said. "I think this reinforces the work we've done in terms of communicating with our community, getting their feedback and letting them know we want them to be part of the process."

West Siders -- administrators, faculty and residents alike -- crowded into the Pine Room at Bliss Creek Golf Course in Sugar Grove. Amid red and blue balloons, Rydland never removed his hand from the computer's mouse while relentlessly updating local election Web sites. The results were projected onto a big screen, and the suspense grew by the minute, as cautious applause could be heard with each update.

With two precincts not reporting until after 10:15 p.m. Tuesday, the tension mounted. But in the end, West won a photo finish and, along with securing its finances, the district will be able to start a refresh cycle on buses, computers and band instruments. Officials plan to install security systems in all district facilities, as well, and a process is in place to rehire some of the teachers who received reduction-in-force letters, Rydland said.

"I am so appreciative of the voters getting out," said School Board member Al Rhea, who retained his seat Tuesday night. "This is what communities are made of -- we're all judged by our school systems."

Like all school districts, West faced tough odds, considering that in November and February 21 operating-rate referendums were placed on statewide ballots -- and just three passed.

"I think we should be concerned with the funding of public education in the state of Illinois," Rydland said. "There's a growing inequity in respect to the students in our schools. That (statistic) should get our attention ... it should alarm us and concern us."

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