



For Immediate Release

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Richland County Considers Operating Levy Referendum

Ad Hoc Committee Leading the Effort

RICHLAND CENTER, WISCONSIN: The Richland County Board of Supervisors has directed an ad hoc committee to investigate the possibility of a referendum that would increase the county's operating property tax levy, if passed by Richland County voters.

Two of the goals of the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee are to educate the public about what Richland County government does for the people and why the County is looking into the possibility of a referendum.

Richland County has approximately 280 employees. The vast majority of those exist at Pine Valley Community Village (85), the Health & Human Services Department (75), the Sheriff's Department, (33), and the Highway Department (30). The remaining 57 employees are in smaller departments such as Ambulance, UW-Extension, and many courthouse offices.

The County's employees care for its seniors, people with mental health needs, victims of crime, people traveling on public highways, and many others needing County services.

The County has an annual budget of \$36 million, with the majority of funds coming from federal and state sources. \$10 million comes from Richland County property taxpayers every year. Some departments such as the Sheriff's Department rely heavily on property tax revenues. Others such as the Health and Human Services and Highway Departments rely less on property taxes, but need local monies to match revenues from the federal government and State of Wisconsin.

Since at least 2003, the State of Wisconsin has been reducing its shared revenues, which returns the income and sales taxes it collects to local governments. In 2001, Richland County government received \$1.36 million. By 2022, that number had fallen to \$1.22 million. If adjusted for inflation, that amount today would be \$2.27 million.

The State of Wisconsin has two laws that limit the amount of property tax a local government can levy. The first law says the County cannot raise the levy for operating expenses at a rate faster than new construction, unless the voters approve an operating levy increase through a referendum (*Wisconsin Statute 66.0602*). In Richland County, this is about 0.5% per year. The second law says the County Board can raise the levy for debt, as long as it stays below 5% of the value of all property in the County (*Wisconsin Constitution, Article XI*).

The County Board has raised the levy for debt in recent years to build a new nursing home and fix our roads. But the County Board has not been able to raise the levy for operating expenses, and as a result has reduced wage increases and health insurance benefits for employees, which has increased employee turnover rates to an unsustainable level.

The County Administrator has created a 5-year financial plan that estimates an approximate \$4 million budget gap that will occur to keep up with rising costs by 2027, including regular pay raises for employees. The County Board has directed its departments to identify how it will respond to necessary budget cuts.

The next job of the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee is to work with County departments to better understand which budget cuts can be made permanent, and which may be placed on a referendum to increase the operating property tax levy. If the committee decides voters should have a voice in determining whether budget cuts should be made permanent, it will make a recommendation to the Richland County Finance & Personnel Committee.

The Referendum Ad Hoc Committee welcomes questions and thoughts from the public as it investigates the possibility of a referendum. The public may contact Committee Chair Shaun Murphy-Lopez at 608-462-3715 or shaun.murphy@co.richland.wi.us, or visit the committee's website at <https://administrator.co.richland.wi.us/minutes/referendum-ad-hoc-committee/>.

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