

NO

3,207

YES

338

# Wyomissing voters spurn \$37 million school plan



Reading Eagle: Tim Leedy

Wyomissing School District residents enter the Wyomissing Library on Tuesday to vote.

## The Wyomissing vote

**Why it was important?** Tuesday's vote in the Wyomissing School District was the first time residents in Berks County cast a ballot on school spending. In the future, other school districts seeking to construct a new school or make major upgrades likely will need to seek voter approval first.

**What was at stake?** Voters were asked to support the district's plan to spend \$37 million to build a new school in West Reading and make other improvements at other buildings. District officials said the current West Reading Elementary School is overcrowded and outdated.

**What's next?** District officials said at least \$9.5 million in upgrades are needed in the current school, but that work will not expand the building. The district does not have that money set aside and again would need voter approval. The district has made no decision on a course of action.

By a nearly 10-1 margin, district residents reject borrowing that much money. One critic says the result shows even paying for a special election was a waste.

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By Darrin Youker  
Reading Eagle

Wyomissing School District voters sent a clear message to the school board in a special referendum Tuesday, soundly rejecting a \$37 million building plan.

The referendum went down in a landslide, 3,207 to 338.

More than 90 percent of those who voted cast ballots against the referendum, which would have paved the way for the district to replace the aging West Reading Elementary School.

About 40 percent of the district's 8,800 registered voters took part in the special election.

There's no mistaking that residents were dissatisfied with the plan, Wyomissing School Board member Jana R. Barnett said, but trying to figure out the mean-

what message is being sent," she said.

The school board has no immediate plans to devise a new proposal, Barnett said.

"What the district needs to do is focus on curriculum, focus on regaining the community's trust and figure out how we are going to pay for the necessary repairs (to West Reading Elementary)," she said. "That is an awful lot of work in and of itself."

The referendum was the first of its type in Berks County, but others are certain to follow.

A state law enacted in 2006 requires school boards to seek voter approval before spending money on new schools or extensive renovations.

It is only a matter of time before another Berks district faces a voter referendum, Wyomissing school director John A. Larkin said.

## On the Web

Video of residents discussing why they voted yes or no is available with





# Wyomissing | Voters reject school plan

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"Major projects and school constructions will be a democratic process from now on," he said. "The people are speaking."

Board member Larry Fitzgerald, who did not support the West Reading project, said he was glad that the issue was put before voters.

"They have spoken very loud and very clear," he said. "I'm glad it was decisive."

Bill Murray, a member of the Wyo Area Too Much Money — a group that campaigned against the referendum, said board members should listen to the message residents sent.

"The district only got 338 votes of support. That is sinful," he said. "It was a total waste of taxpayer dollars to run this election."

The district spent more than \$40,000 on the referendum, including hiring a consulting firm.

The district's plans called for eliminating overcrowding at the West Reading Elementary school by taking the former West Reading High School by

eminent domain and demolishing it to make way for a new building.

Voters interviewed as they left the polls gave a variety of reasons for their votes.

Those who voted no cited concerns about the cost of the project, the tax impact and the destruction of a historic building.

Among them were Leon and Teresa Bennethum of West Reading, who said they were grateful at the chance to have their voices heard in the referendum.

"They should have utilized the things they have instead of building new," Leon Bennethum said.

Brett R. Mazzerle of West Reading said he voted no because the district did not adequately explore other alternatives. The cost of the project and the tax increase that would have gone with it were reasonable, Mazzerle said, but the plan was simply too grandiose.

"There were other avenues around the problem," Mazzerle said. "It was just wasteful spending."

Earlene Terefenko of Wyomissing shuddered at the thought of the school district tearing down the former high school, now being used as an apartment building. It is wasteful to demolish a perfectly good building just to put another one in its place, she said.

"I'm all for keeping old buildings," she said. "It would also be cheaper."

Gerry Thompson of Wyomissing Hills said renovating the existing school would be much cheaper.

"My children went through the Wyomissing school system and the time they spent in West Reading worked out fine," he said.

Barbara A. Cammarano of Wyomissing said she liked the small, personal feeling that was pervasive at the West Reading school. The district's plan was simply too expensive to support, she added.

"I like the school as it is," Cammarano said. "We don't need our taxes going up any more."

Among those who said they voted for the referendum, rea-

sons also varied.

Harry D. Grill Jr. of West Reading said he favored the project because any delays in building a new school will simply drive up the cost. He also wants to keep a school in the borough.

"Now is the time to do this," Grill said.

Hallie Guisepppe of Wyomissing voted for the referendum to ensure that children have an adequate school long into the future.

"I'm all for schools that will benefit the kids," she said.

Ed C. Barrett of Wyomissing sympathized with the school board's plight, but he also voted no.

Barrett said there is no easy solution to finding a place for a new school in the district, and no cheap fix to the overcrowding in West Reading, but he is convinced the board can find a cheaper solution.

"They are working as hard to find an elusive answer," Barrett added. "They are doing the best they can."

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