

The May 27, 2008 Referendum

On May 27, 2008, Wakefield voters will have an opportunity to participate in a referendum election concerning the School Department budget that was voted by the Annual Town Meeting. The following information is provided by the Board of Selectmen to assist voters in understanding the referendum.

1. What is the referendum question and what does it mean?

The referendum question will read as follows:

“That the Town raise and appropriate the sum of \$27,473,670 for the School Department, and to provide therefor that the sum of \$90,000 be appropriated by transfer to the ‘School Department Contractual Service -- Bus Transportation’ account from the ‘Offset Receipts -- 2008 Bus Transportation User Fees’ account, and that the balance be raised and appropriated from tax levy.”

Under our Town Charter, most affirmative votes of Town Meeting are open to challenge by a referendum if at least 200 registered voters file a timely petition with the Board of Selectmen. The referendum question must be in substantially the same form as the question that was put to Town Meeting by the Moderator. The language of the Town Meeting vote at issue -- and, therefore, the language of the referendum question -- provides for a School Department budget for the upcoming fiscal year of \$27,473,670, of which all but \$90,000 will be raised through tax levy. (The \$90,000 will come from bus fees.) The School Department budget voted by Town Meeting was higher by more than \$2 million than that recommended by the Finance Committee, and would leave the Town with an unbalanced budget unless additional revenues were found or new cuts were made at a later Town Meeting.

2. What does a “yes” vote mean?

If a majority of the persons casting ballots in the referendum election vote “yes,” then the Town Meeting vote will remain in effect and the total School Department budget for the next fiscal year will be \$27,473,670. Since that amount, taken together with other Town budgets, is higher than the Town can afford, Town officials will have to seek ways to balance the budget in the months following the election. The most likely ways of doing so would be either to increase revenues by proposing an override of Proposition 2 ½ or a debt or capital exclusion from the limits of Proposition 2 ½, or to reduce expenses by calling another Town Meeting to lower one or more budgets. By law, the Town cannot set a new tax rate in the fall (which it needs to do in order to send out tax bills) unless it has balanced its overall budget.

3. What does a “no” vote mean?

If a majority of the persons casting ballots in the referendum election vote “no,” then the Town Meeting vote fixing the School Department budget at \$27,473,670 will be voided. When the new fiscal year commences on July 1, 2008, the School Department will operate on a month-to-month basis. Each month’s budget will be one-twelfth of the budget from the prior fiscal year, unless and until a new budget is voted by a subsequent Town Meeting.