



CITY OF SOUTH MILWAUKEE REFERENDUM FAQs

WHY IS THE CITY GOING TO REFERENDUM?

On April 7, 2026, City of South Milwaukee residents will vote on a referendum question to decide whether or not to support a \$425,000 increase in the property tax levy to restore services to pre-pandemic levels at the public library in the City of South Milwaukee.

WHAT WILL APPEAR ON THE BALLOT?

The formal resolution requesting permission to exceed the state revenue limit will appear as follows on the April 7 ballot:

Under state law, the increase in the levy of the City of South Milwaukee for the tax to be imposed for the next fiscal year, 2027, is limited to .317%, which results in a levy of \$12,446,757. Shall the City of South Milwaukee be allowed to exceed this limit and increase the levy for the next fiscal year, 2027, for the purpose of funding operations of the South Milwaukee Public Library, by a total of 3.415%, which results in a levy of \$12,871,757, and on an ongoing basis, include the increase of \$425,000 for each fiscal year going forward?

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF A MAJORITY OF VOTERS VOTE "YES"?

If the referendum is approved by a majority of voters, the library will be able to restore services to pre-pandemic levels by increasing operating hours, improving available materials, and offering additional programming and services by hiring new staff.

WHAT WILL IT MEAN IF A MAJORITY VOTE "NO"?

If the referendum does not pass, the City will have to make difficult decisions about the library's future. This could mean eliminating staff positions, which will require further reductions to hours of operation and available programming and services, as well as further cuts to the library's budget for collections.

WHY DO WE NEED A REFERENDUM TO FUND THE LIBRARY?

The State of Wisconsin limits the amount of property taxes a City can collect each year based on new construction. In order to exceed the levy limit, the City needs voter approval through a City wide referendum. Based on the City's current structure and funding mechanisms, an increase in the property tax levy would be required to fund the operational costs associated with the library.

WHY DOES THE LIBRARY REQUIRE ADDITIONAL OPERATIONAL FUNDING?

Due to state-imposed levy limits and a need to make budget reductions in other areas of the City's operating budget, the library's budget has decreased by nearly 20% from 2019 to 2025. If there is no increase in funding for library services, additional cuts will need to be made to staffing, programming, and hours.



WHAT ARE THE TAX IMPACTS OF THE REFERENDUM?

If City residents approve the referendum, the estimated property tax impact would be approximately \$27 annually per \$100,000 in assessed value, which for the median \$225,000 home in South Milwaukee is about \$60 per year. The total tax levy in 2026 would increase by \$425,000, beginning with property tax bills issued in December 2026.

WHAT SERVICES OR IMPROVEMENTS WOULD THE ADDITIONAL FUNDING SUPPORT?

If approved, the referendum would allow the library to restore its hours of operation to pre-pandemic levels — from 44 to a projected 54 hours per week, a 23% increase — and expand staffing to support enhanced programming. In addition, the library's budget for new books, media, and additional digital materials will increase, providing more resources for residents of South Milwaukee.

HOW DOES SOUTH MILWAUKEE'S LIBRARY SERVICES COMPARE TO OTHER LIBRARIES IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY?

Due to budget constraints, the South Milwaukee Public Library is currently open for the fewest hours of any library in Milwaukee County and provides one of the lowest levels of local funding per resident among municipalities countywide. The library was open 2,288 hours in 2023 — 26.7% below the county median. A referendum would help the library align more closely with county service levels and meet resident expectations for access and programming.

WHAT ACTION HAS THE CITY TAKEN TO REDUCE OPERATING COSTS?

Given rising costs and flat property tax levy revenues, the City has taken steps to reduce costs, including closing its senior center and reducing staffing in its Street Department in 2025. In 2023, the library reduced its operating hours by 19%, which reduced costs by cutting staff hours.

WHY IS THE INCREASE FROM THE STATE'S SHARED REVENUE FROM ACT 12 NOT THE SOLUTION?

While increases to shared revenue starting in 2024 have provided a much needed boost in municipal funds, it is not enough to offset the decades of underfunding and rising costs. The City received an additional \$2.2M in shared revenue over the past three years — which has been used to fund public safety and the merging of emergency dispatch services with the City of Oak Creek, which is an overall service enhancement for the City of South Milwaukee.

This amount, while helpful, has not come close to covering the funding gap across all services from the last decade of levy limits, given the way the costs for goods and services are also increasing.



ARE THERE OTHER REVENUE SOURCES THAT CAN HELP FUND THIS PROJECT?

The Friends of the South Milwaukee Library supports library programming through fundraising and advocacy. However, this organization does not fund staffing and operational costs, which is what the referendum is addressing.

The City and the library regularly pursue grants, donations, and other supplemental sources of revenue, but these options are typically one-time funds, are highly competitive, and cannot provide the stable, ongoing revenue needed to maintain library hours, staff, and programming. These supplemental sources are valuable but cannot replace the sustainable and predictable funding required to operate the library at the service levels residents expect.

DIDN'T THE CITY JUST GO TO REFERENDUM?

This would be the second referendum for the City of South Milwaukee in eight years. The City previously went to referendum in 2017 to increase its levy by \$616,641 (or 5.3%) in support of public safety services. It was approved, with roughly two-thirds of voters in support.

WHAT WERE THE FORMAL FINDINGS OF THE WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM REPORT?

In a Wisconsin Policy Forum Report conducted in April 2025, it was discovered that the South Milwaukee Public Library, while average in size and population served, is operating on a significantly reduced budget compared to its peers and historical funding levels. This financial reality has caused its service capacity, collection size, and hours of operation to shrink.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CITY'S CAPITAL BUDGET AND OPERATING BUDGET?

The City has an Operating Budget and a Capital Budget. The Capital Budget funds major improvements to City facilities and infrastructure. The Capital Budget is supported through multiple funding sources, including different types of bonds (i.e. borrowing, debt), grants, and cash, as well as other smaller sources of funding. Capital budgets are not restricted by the state's levy limits and are funded through the debt levy portion of the City's property tax.

The Operating Budget pays for expenses such as personnel costs, facility operating costs, and other expenses that fund City services. It is funded primarily through local property taxes; shared revenue from the state; licenses, such as building and other fees; charges for services; fines and other smaller sources of revenue. Increases to the property tax levy for the Operating Budget are limited to the City's annual percentage of net new construction by Wisconsin State Statutes, and can otherwise only be increased through a referendum.

WHY CAN'T THE CITY REALLOCATE MONEY FROM OTHER DEPARTMENTS?

Given the broader funding challenges, the City has been reallocating funds from the library to support vital services such as public safety, public health, and public works. With most departments already operating with reduced staffing and tight budgets, reallocation alone cannot provide the sustainable, ongoing funding needed to support library operations.



WHEN AND WHERE DO I VOTE?

City voters can cast their vote one of three ways: through absentee mail-in ballots, early in-person voting at the City Clerk's office, or in-person voting on election day, April 7, 2026.

Voters can request a mailed absentee ballot from the myvote.wi.gov or the City Clerk's office. You may request an absentee ballot be mailed to you until April 2, 2026 at 5:00 p.m. If you plan to return your absentee ballot using the U.S. Postal Service, please remember that the ballot must be RECEIVED by the City Clerk's Office by the close of polls on election day, April 7, 2026. Absentee ballots may be returned at the City Clerk's Office on election day. Absentee ballots received after the close of polls will not be counted.

In-person early voting will take place at the City Administration Building (2424 15th Avenue, South Milwaukee, WI 53172). You may also request and vote via an absentee ballot in the Clerk's office during the days and hours specified for casting an absentee ballot in person.

In-person absentee voting will take place between **March 24** and **April 3** with the following hours:

March 24-27, 2026: 7:45 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

March 30, 2026: 7:45 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

March 31, 2026: 7:45 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

April 1-2, 2026: 7:45 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

April 3, 2026: 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

By appointment, if requested

On April 7, polling places will open at 7:00 a.m. and close at 8:00 p.m. Wisconsin voters are required to show an acceptable photo ID in order to vote.

Additional voting information, including finding your polling place and requesting an absentee ballot, can be found on myvote.wi.gov. If you have further questions on voting, please contact the City Clerk at 414-768-7499.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS REFERENDUM?

Official information about the referendum will be shared via the City of South Milwaukee's website:
<https://www.southmilwaukee.gov/578/Library-Referendum-2026>

WHO CAN I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Send any questions or feedback to the City of South Milwaukee at referendum@southmilwaukee.gov

