



Donovan Group  
School Communications

School District of Fort Atkinson

Focus Group Report – 2019

Joe Donovan, Donovan Group

# Focus Group: 5 Meetings

- The first group meeting, held in the afternoon of December 2 included 3 community members.
- A second group held December 3 included 11 staff participants.
- A third meeting was held at noon on December 3 in which four community members attended.
- Later that day, another group was held which included two community members.
- Finally, on December 11, the last of the sessions was held and included six community members.
- In keeping with best practices, the names of the participants will be kept anonymous.

# Focus Group: Process

Each of the focus groups began with a welcome by Dr. Rob Abbott, Interim Superintendent.

At the conclusion of Dr. Abbott's welcome, Dr. Abbott left the meeting room. Jason Demerath, the school district's business manager and Marissa Weidenfeller, the district's Communication and Community Engagement Specialist stayed in the room for the focus group meetings. Ms. Weidenfeller took notes.

# Focus Group: Process

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After Dr. Abbott's welcome, Mr. Demerath outlined the need for an operational referendum and four options shared with the board. It should be noted, just as Mr. Demerath did, that the options presented are not the only ones being considered by the board.

# Focus Group: Process

The options presented included the following:

- 1) Base Scenario - No Referendum
- 2) Scenario #1 - 3-Year \$5.2 Million Non-Recurring
- 3) Scenario #2 - 4-Year \$5.9 Million Non-Recurring
- 4) Scenario #3 - 4-Year Targeting \$10.61 Levy Rate
- 5) Scenario #4 - 3-Year \$3 Million Non-Recurring and \$2.25 Million Recurring

# Focus Group: Process

At the conclusion of Mr. Demerath's presentation, Joe Donovan, the focus group facilitator, asked participants to direct questions about the need for the referendum and the various options under consideration to Mr. Demerath. In all cases, Mr. Demerath was asked similar questions, as noted below.

Mr. Donovan then asked each of the groups the following questions:

# Focus Group: Process

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**1) How would you describe the School District of Fort Atkinson to someone who is not familiar with it?**

# Focus Group: Process

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**2) A few minutes ago, Mr. Demerath provided you with some background about options being considered. What are your general thoughts about what Mr. Demerath presented? Let us keep things general for now.**

# Focus Group: Process

**3) As we were discussing your reactions to what Mr. Demerath presented, some of you provided your thoughts about which of the three options plans you preferred. Do you prefer option #1, option #2, option #3, or option #4.**

# Focus Group: Process

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**4) The board has clarified that it is interested in your feedback. As the board considers an upcoming referendum, what advice or additional information do you want to make sure board members have?**

# Focus Group: Findings

## **Theme 1) Participants are very pleased with the school district.**

There was clear consensus across all of the groups that the School District of Fort Atkinson is a good school district. In every group, participants spoke of it as being “forward thinking” or “progressive” in efforts to address the needs of students. Another popular theme is that the district was “diverse” and that this diversity was a very good thing for the district. It is worth noting here that the reaction of participants to the first question was not that the district is “just okay” or “satisfactory” but as expressed by participants, far better than that.

# Focus Group: Findings

## **Theme 2) No sticker shock.**

Often, when focus group participants are provided with first presented with tax impact numbers for a potential referendum, there is a reaction of concern or even scorn or disillusionment. We call this sticker shock. We did not have sticker shock in any discernible way during our focus group conversations. Some participants noted that the community had “come to expect” the district coming to voters for a referendum and there was no concern for the district in doing so.

# Focus Group: Findings

## **Theme 3) No lack-of-trust indicators.**

Usually, when we conduct focus groups, the issue of trust arises. Even if the focus group participants themselves note that they trust the district, often the issue of trust manifests itself with participants noting that their neighbors may not share their trust in the district. While this was not a major theme when we conducted focus group meetings in advance of the district's last referendum, the issue of trust did come up in focus group meetings, just as it normally does in such conversations. It is important to note that during our conversations, the issue of trust was never brought up. In fact, the opposite is true: Not only were there no indicators of lack of trust, there were plenty of indicators a strong trust in the community for its school administration and board.

# Focus Group: Findings

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## **Theme 4) Confusion between the operational needs and facility needs.**

During the focus group meetings, participants asked several times if the operational information being presented related to the facilities-related work underway. Participants expressed some confusion on the subject. This should be resolved if the district moves forward with an operational referendum.

# Focus Group: Findings

## **Theme 5) Stability.**

If there was one central theme in all of the focus group conversations it was “stability”. Focus group participants noted that they appreciated that there was financial stability in the district. Participants contrasted the School District of Fort Atkinson with a neighboring district that is facing dire financial challenges. Participants also noted that they wanted “stability” and “sustainability” in the future. Often, these words were used to compare and contrast the various options under consideration.

# Focus Group: Findings

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## **Theme 6) The district should pursue an operational referendum.**

Across the board, among all participants, there was unanimous agreement that the district should go to referendum to replace the expiring referendum. No disagreements were voiced.

# Focus Group: Findings

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## **Theme 7) The district should not make additional cuts.**

For all participants, there were no suggestions that the district should make cuts in light of its expiring referendum.

# Focus Group: Findings

**Theme 8) The projected mill rate presented in the referendum questions was not considered to be a barrier.**

As noted, there was no “sticker shock” for any of the options presented and the impact numbers suggested were not seen to be a barrier for any of the task force members as expressed in their conversations.

# Focus Group: Findings

## **Theme 9) The question of a recurring versus non-recurring referendum.**

As with the focus groups held in advance of the last referendum, among all focus group sessions there was wide discussions about whether the referendum should be recurring or non-recurring in nature. Most of the participants said that they personally liked the recurring nature of the referendum because it provided for ongoing sustainability for the district. But several of those same participants expressed concern about whether their fellow community members would support such a referendum. A few participants noted that it was a positive for the district to make their case to the community every few years for the sake of accountability or because the funds the district needs may increase in time.

There was a general consensus that a non-recurring referendum, or one in which a non-recurring referendum was part of the solution, was preferred. Participants who asked about what was passed last time seem to desire the recurring and non-recurring option again this time.

# Focus Group: Findings

**Theme 10) There was speculation among participants about whether the amount included in the referenda presented is enough.**

In one focus group meeting, participants noted that the four options were very similar and that, if passed, the increased revenue limit authority would not allow the district to increase programming, but simply keep pace. Several participants noted that they wished the district could continue efforts to improve programs and services with more revenue. Participants in all of the sessions asked if the amount requested were adequate and provided sustainability for the district.



Thank you!