

'Great validation'

Voters pass LMC millage by narrow margin

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BENTON HARBOR — The outcome turned into a real nail biter, but Lake Michigan College's 0.48-mill capital millage request passed by a 685-vote margin Tuesday night.

Returns from the Berrien County Clerk's Office showed the college's 10-year capital millage request passing by a 35,619-34,935 tally with 70 of 70 precincts reporting.

The figures didn't reflect absentee ballots, LMC President Emeritus/Acting CEO Bob Harrison said.

However, after talking with the Clerk's Office, Harrison said all the absentee ballots have been counted, and the millage has passed.

"We're thinking it's pretty much done now," Harrison said. "They (the totals) came in late because we end up with part of Van Buren County, and a little bit of Allegan County, so there was some delay. The numbers look good to us, knowing there's a certification process to go through."

The pace of counting and interest in the proposal — ensured a lengthy night for Harrison. LMC Board

Chairwoman Mary Jo Tomasini, and other board members and employees, as they waited at the Harbor Shores Inn for results.

As of 11:45 p.m., for example, the millage proposal led by a far smaller margin, with 24,327 voting "yes," and 24,237 voting "no."

"We're pleased at the outcome. We had a group of volunteers develop the millage proposal, and go through a process to help get it passed. We see this as a great validation of what we do, and a great decision by voters in Southwest Michigan," Harrison said.

Tomasini voiced similar feelings, which matched the feedback she heard — or read — online.

"I feel great about it (the vote). We're just so excited that Southwest Michigan believes in the college, and feels this their college. I've heard so many comments on Facebook, primarily, where people said, 'I voted for my college,'" she said.

Tomasini didn't recall hearing any negative feedback in talking with voters about the millage.

"There's anxiety with any millage because no one wants more taxes, but I've received nothing but positive comments about how important the college is to the community, and how we've asked for a relatively small amount of money to do a large scope of work," she said.

As far as Tomasini could



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Lake Michigan College interim president Bob Harrison greets supporters during an election night party Tuesday at The Inn at Harbor Shores.

tell, former president Jennifer Spielvogel's firing last May didn't affect the proposal, either way.

"That, quite frankly, is a separate issue, and people were able to separate the two things — human resources, versus capital investment," she said.

Harrison said he didn't entertain any expectations, either way, for the proposal that marked the first capital millage in LMC's history.

LMC levies a separate operating millage of 1.78 mills.

"I thought we'd just see what the voters said, and sort everything out from there," he said.

Harrison attributed Tuesday's win to several factors, starting with a volunteer group of about 20 to 40 people that did 70 presentations to various community groups. Harrison estimated that he did

15 presentations alone.

"We (also) did a combination of some direct mail stuff and polling to ask what people thought the priorities were. It helped us focus on what the voters wanted to hear, and what explanations they were looking at from us," he said.

The capital millage amounts to \$2 more per month — or an additional \$24 per year — in property taxes for a homeowner with a home valued at \$100,000, according to the college.

Approval of the millage allows LMC to raise about \$40.3 million for money-saving improvements and energy efficiencies, modernized classrooms, safety and security improvements, and Student Support Services area improvements, on all of its campuses.

The college will use

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\$7.5 million collected from a community-wide capital campaign – plus \$8.5 million in state grants, and other investments, to help complete the projects.

Harrison said that all campuses will benefit from the millage, which will gen-

erate about \$4 million per year.

“We’re furthest along in the remodeling and renovation of the Napier (Avenue campus) facility, so we’ll continue down that path,” Harrison said. “I’ll entertain some thoughtful dialogue within other parts of the (college’s service) region, talking about, ‘What are the needs at South Hav-

en? Where can we make facility changes to help us grow some programs or implement new programs?’”

The other big task will come in December, when Harrison expects the board to create a committee to oversee the millage so the funds are used as intended.

Tuesday’s win frees the college to consider differ-

ent financing options it couldn’t have considered before, Harrison said.

“We’ll look at implementation strategies like, ‘Do we issue some bonds? Do we do a conventional loan, so we can move this along further, so we can start work here in the next couple years?’” he said.

Tomasini said she looks forward to seeing how the

plans work out, now that additional funding is available to pursue them.

“That changes things as far as being best in class in the community, and the effect it will have on the local economy, the employment market, and the health of Southwest Michigan, after all,” she said.

Examples include a replacement of the heating,

ventilation and cooling system – which is about 40 years old – at the Napier Avenue campus, a move that is expected to save \$300,000 in energy costs per year, Tomasini said.

“That is huge. All three campuses will benefit from this millage. It doesn’t matter what community voted for it. It will benefit everyone,” she said.

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