

It's THE BIG LIE. It's being told from Grafton to Oconomowoc and everywhere in between that school districts are looking to voters this year to approve massive referendums. The LIE is: "There's nowhere left to cut. We've cut every ounce of fat out of the budget. To cut anymore gravely endangers educational quality."

The referendum details are different from district to district but the pitch is always the same. Building improvements and expansions have to be paid for through long-term borrowing (bonding), they LIE, because the operating budgets are cut to the bone. The lying continues with the claim that state aid is plummeting and brick and mortar work has to be done by issuing huge bond issues.

Many are going to the voters next month. Muskego, Mukwonago, Menomonee Falls and Grafton are just come of the communities being asked to borrow staggering sums and pay it back over many years. Oconomowoc, Arrowhead and many others are planning to go in November. It isn't just that they are lying about their finances. Piling on tens of millions of long term debt is not sustainable. By refusing to cut their spending, the districts are merely guaranteeing they will need another referendum in a few years. Debt will be layered onto to older debt. The amount of money needed each year to pay back the borrowing will eat up even more of the operating budget. It's a vicious and irresponsible cycle.

The school superintendents and school board members pushing the borrowing now figure they won't be around when their irresponsible bonding chickens come home to roost. But the spend and borrow cycle has been tried by lots of individuals in their own personal lives. It inevitably leads to Chapter Somethingoranother or a call to Peter Francis Geraci. For school districts, the long term budget crunch will be far worse because of the short term decision to borrow now rather than show fiscal responsibility.

That's where the LIE comes in. They protest they have nowhere left to cut. Here are some questions that can be asked in any of the districts seeking referendum approval.

What is the annual cost of the employee health insurance plan?

Are retirees still being carried on that plan?

Are employees offered more than one option? Do they have a choice between a lower cost plan with higher deductibles and co-pays and a more expensive plan that covers more?

What percent of the cost of the premium is paid by employees?

What are the annual deductibles and out of pocket maximums on plans with single coverage? Same question for family coverage.

Are spouses who have insurance available at their own employers allowed to get coverage under your district plan?

Are school board members allowed to tap into the district's insurance plan?

How many staff positions per school are designated as "administration?"

How many administrators are assigned to no school at all but are instead based at the central office?

How much money is spent on professional association dues?

What is the total budget for "staff development," including all of the speakers brought in for in-service workshops?

What is your annual spending on outside public relations? How much did you pay the consultants who recommended the referendum?

What is your annual telephone budget and who is your provider? When is the last time you changed providers?

How many televisions in the district are wired for cable or satellite? Which channels are you paying for?

I'd go on with a lot more questions but this column isn't allowed to take up the whole paper. The questions are just a partial list of the many areas in which millions can be saved by scaling back unneeded spending. You may have noticed that many of the questions deal with spending that directly benefits school administrators themselves. This isn't a coincidence. Administrators aren't likely to recommend health insurance changes that raise their own premiums and hike their own out of pocket expenses.

Private businesses address questions like the ones above all the time. They are forced to economize. School districts don't do it because they aren't forced to do any cutting. They merely tell the LIE to an unsuspecting constituency and get \$50 million referendums passed.

The most galling part of this is that some districts actually do act responsibly. They prove you can handle state budget cuts and accommodate facility needs without referendum bonding. New Berlin is an example. But most school boards aren't willing to make the tough and responsible choices boards make in communities like New Berlin.

It's easier to just tell THE BIG LIE.