

EDUCATION

Virginia communities race to get 1% sales tax for school construction on the ballot

Proponents say the additional money could help cash-strapped communities fix aging school facilities, but how much revenue would be collected and whether voters will agree is still unknown.



by **Meghan Mangrum**

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By 2022, when this photo was taken, at least three rooms in at Prince Edward County Elementary School had been rendered unusable due to water damage and mildew. To pay for renovations, the county increased property taxes and received a grant. Photo by Amy Trent.

For years, it rained inside Prince Edward Elementary School.

Photographs show the **large plastic buckets and trash bins** teachers and school staff would set out on rainy days to catch the water seeping through the ceiling and dampening walls. By 2022, at least three rooms in the part of the school built in the 1980s had been rendered unusable due to water damage and mildew.

The school's 800 students and teachers had nowhere to go: The county, known for its part in the fight against racial segregation in public schools during the 1950s and 1960s, has just three school buildings.

And though County Administrator Doug Stanley has for years called the district the “poster child for crumbling schools,” Prince Edward isn't alone.

Five years ago, a Virginia Department of Education report found that more than half of the state's public school buildings surveyed were at least half a century old. The **2021 report**, presented to the Commission on School Construction and Modernization, estimated that nearly \$25 billion was needed at the time to fully replace these aging facilities.

Since then, construction costs have only gone up and the time it takes to complete school renovation projects or new builds has increased.

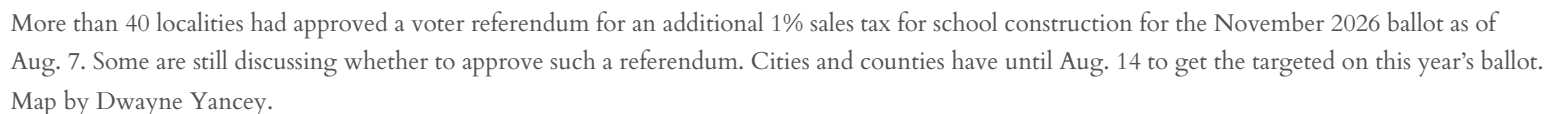
But now, thanks to a new law passed during the most recent General Assembly session, communities have a new route for raising funds to fix aging schools.



Doug Stanley. Courtesy of Prince Edward County.

School boards and local officials across the state have been racing to get a 1% sales tax increase for school construction costs on the ballot this November. The move to add or increase sales taxes, in the form of a referendum in each community, needs first to be greenlit by the local courts and then to be approved by

Sales tax for schools



But some local leaders are pointing to the money raised in places that have already had the option to levy an additional sales tax for school projects — **\$11.5 million in Pittsylvania County** since 2023, \$28 million in Henry County — in an attempt to persuade voters to back the efforts.

<https://cardinalnews.org/2026/08/10/virginia-communities-race-to-get-1-sales-tax-for-school-construction-on-the-ballot/>

In 2024, the county **started** a nearly \$40 million renovation project to modernize the school. It's being paid for through a \$8.6 million grant from the Virginia Capital School Projects Fund and local funds raised by county residents' increased real estate property tax bills.

Prince Edward County voters will still see a referendum on their ballot this fall, though, as local officials argue that funds are needed for the county's middle and high schools.

Stanley is celebrating the move by the General Assembly to give localities the sales tax option and now, as in many communities, an effort is underway to persuade voters that such a tax increase is needed.



An aerial view of Prince Edward County Elementary School in Farmville shows the ongoing renovation that is merging nine buildings into one large campus. On the left sit dozens of portable classrooms where classes have held throughout the renovation. Courtesy of Prince Edward County.

A potential 'game changer' for small, rural communities

Visitors to the newly renovated Prince Edward County Elementary School are immediately greeted by the library and a new parent resource center.

It's one of Superintendent Chip Jones' favorite aspects of the project.

"It just gives that feel of school because your first focal point is the library," he said. "Parents might not necessarily have to go into the main school if they just want to go in there and check out some books or some resources to help support their students."

The renovation, which is slated to be completed next spring, brings nine separate buildings under one roof, Jones said, increasing the security of the school and "modernizing" classrooms.

Dozens of Virginia schools could use the same type of updates, school leaders say, but in many communities, schools are competing with courthouses, jails, road projects and more for limited local funds.

Cities and counties predominantly fund schools and capital projects with the revenue raised through real estate property taxes.

For years, some local officials have argued that they need additional ways to raise funds such as through targeted sales taxes. Some state lawmakers have agreed, arguing that such a tax would give communities a better way to address growing school renovation and construction costs.

But localities in Virginia can only exercise the powers given to them by the state. This year, lawmakers passed legislation giving cities and counties the authority to put a referendum on their ballots to impose a 1% sales tax increase to help pay for school construction.

Previously, only nine localities — including Henry County, Danville and Pittsylvania County — had been authorized to levy the additional sales tax through an action taken by the General Assembly in 2020.

In the years since, Democrats pushed to expand the tax but the efforts either failed or were vetoed by Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin.



Chip Jones. Courtesy of Prince Edward County schools.

This year, the new expanded policy became law through the state's budget process, with lawmakers in a Democratic-controlled General Assembly approving the final budget mostly along party lines.

Once Gov. Abigail Spanberger signed the budget into law on June 29, local governments moved quickly. In the weeks since, dozens have approved resolutions approving such a referendum.

Franklin County is one of more than a half-dozen localities across Southwest and Southside that have taken action.



Steve Sandy. Courtesy of Franklin County.

The county's school division had identified more than \$117 million in capital improvement needs, including \$4 million for urgent HVAC and boiler upgrades at an elementary school and much more for a new career and technical education center.

County Administrator Steve Sandy said the tax could generate as much as \$7 million in additional revenue for school construction and renovation needs, thanks in part to visitors at Smith Mountain Lake who make purchases in Franklin County.

It would help the county avoid raising property taxes, he told supervisors last month.

In Martinsville, where the city council [voted unanimously last month to add a referendum](#) to the November ballot, council member Aaron Rawls echoed Sandy's sentiment. Rawls said the sales tax would spread the burden to people who do not live in the city, but shop there.

Martinsville city officials looked to surrounding Henry County, one of the localities that already had the ability to levy a sales tax for school construction, when considering the referendum.

"If you're buying anything in Henry County now, if you shop at Walmart or Lowe's, Roses, Rural King, if you go to any of those stores, you're currently paying [an additional tax] for Henry County," Martinsville Vice Mayor Kathy Lawson [said at a July 17 council meeting](#).

Henry County voters passed the sales tax referendum in 2020, and the county's sales tax increased from 5.3% to 6.3%. Since then, the county has brought in [nearly \\$28 million in revenue](#) for school projects, according to county documents. In 2025 alone, the tax brought in more than \$5.5 million in revenue. County school

improvement projects include elevators at two elementary schools, fieldhouses for both high schools and HVAC systems.

The 1% generated revenue is estimated to bring in at least \$3.8 million each year for schools in Pittsylvania County. In Danville, it has helped fund projects at four schools.

Jeremy Bennett, director of intergovernmental affairs for the Virginia Association of Counties, helped lobby for the policy. He pointed to Halifax County as an example of what's possible.

"It's been really transformative," Bennett said of the county, one of the first localities to implement the sales tax to pay for a new \$129 million school building.

"You had their old high school and it served the community, but when you visited, there were parts that didn't have HVAC. You literally had bricks falling off the front of the building, and now they have a brand new modern facility," Bennett said. "Other localities, they've also built new buildings or at the very least upgraded the conditions of the existing structures."

Hope for a new funding stream

Keith Perrigan, schools superintendent in Washington County and president of the Coalition of Small and Rural Schools of Virginia, said in an email that the ability for localities to raise extra funds for school capital projects is a "game changer for small and rural communities."

As of the end of July, at least 17 members of the coalition had already added it to the ballot this fall or planned to do so, and more are expected to make the move next year.

Perrigan has long fought for more funding for Virginia school facilities. A member of an [advisory committee](#) for the National Center on School Infrastructure, Perrigan has raised awareness about how hard it is for small, rural communities to maintain safe, modern school buildings without state support.

Nearly a decade ago, his coalition launched the "[Crumbling Schools Tour](#)" to give lawmakers and community members a firsthand look at the state of many rural schools.

He's noted that this new potential revenue stream comes as many communities have seen their share of state funding decrease in the past year thanks to changes in their local composite index, which dictates the local-versus-state split for funding schools.

For many small school divisions like Washington County, a million-dollar deficit in their operating budget means regular maintenance projects get cut, adding to burgeoning capital needs that fall to the locality to fund.

Working to persuade voters

Sales taxes can raise significant revenue in shopping destinations or tourist areas and give localities an alternative to increasing real estate property taxes for raising revenue. But they can also be a burden for local residents.

Franklin County Public Schools Superintendent Kevin Siers acknowledged [at a July board of supervisors meeting](#) that it's hard to persuade voters to support any tax increase.

"I think that we all recognize it is not going to be an easy sell this fall given everything that has been going on with our regular operating budget and what seems to be a growing distrust between the public and our local government officials," Siers said.

When the 2020 legislation was introduced and passed, authorizing those first nine localities to levy the tax, some lawmakers who voted against it made the same argument.

Del. Bobby Orrrock, R-Caroline County, said at the time that the legislation would disproportionately impact those with lower incomes and might not help poorer areas that are struggling with failing infrastructure but have small sales tax bases.

The tax would likely generate drastically different amounts of revenue depending on a community's retail footprint and attractions, Orrrock said.

Uncertain revenue projections and this year's tight deadline to get the referendum through the courts and on the ballot have given some communities pause.

Several of the poorest counties in Southwest Virginia — Dickenson, Wise and Buchanan — aren't discussing implementing the sales tax yet. This month, Buchanan County will open a new \$92 million high school, made possible in part through federal funding and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Several blue Northern Virginia communities — including Prince William County, the home of one of the legislation's sponsors, Democratic [Sen. Jeremy McPike](#) — are also waiting to take a more cohesive approach.

“Arlington is very seriously considering it,” Maureen Coffey, vice chair of the county’s governing board, said at a [July 2 meeting of the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission](#). The law’s language allows some Northern Virginia localities to use revenue from the sales tax for transportation services for schoolchildren, an option not available in other parts of the state.

Earlier this year, Arlington County Public Schools leaders [circulated a whitepaper](#) that laid out the need for the sales tax. County officials aim to get it on the ballot in 2027 and are hoping for “regional cohesion,” a strategy for how and when all localities in the region might pursue such a tax.

Perrigan’s own Washington County has tabled discussions for now, with a plan to bring the idea back next year and potentially move for a special election in 2027. Some localities delaying talks want to build out messaging or form a concrete plan for what to do with the funds before asking voters to approve an increase.

“I think asking the taxpayers for an additional 1% on sales tax right now without really getting our ‘why’ out there would be a mistake, because if it got shot down then it would be hard to rebuild that,” Tim Hoden, interim superintendent of Amherst County Public Schools, told his school board at a July meeting.

In Prince Edward, community members are launching a committee to raise awareness and advocate for the referendum ahead of Election Day.

Organizers hope that the “One for Prince Edward” campaign will persuade voters to pass the referendum at the polls, said Justin Pope, one of the group’s leaders and the father of two public schools students.

“You’ll see a lot of people who understand that this is a really sensible thing for the county if other counties have taken advantage of it,” he said. “Prince Edward is actually much more of a shopping destination than these other places. We have a lot of people who come in from elsewhere to shop, so it makes even more sense here.”

It mirrors efforts in [Chesterfield County](#) and [Fairfax](#), where communities are organizing robust campaigns, some with the help of statewide organizations like the Virginia Association of School Superintendents or [hired consultants](#).

Pope said he feels good about his group’s ability to persuade voters.

“I think any parent understands that students, and teachers, take cues from the facilities around them and they can tell if they’re in a school building that is well kept up and invested in and taken care of, they can tell that education is important to the community,” he said.

The ideal aspect of the law change, said Jones, the superintendent, is that if county or city boards approve the referendum this summer, they're just putting it on the ballot.

"They're giving the people the voice. They're not saying they're either for or against it, what they're doing is they're letting their constituents have a voice," he said.

Stanley, the county administrator, also hinted that perhaps the legislation could one day be changed to allow localities to use revenue collected through the sales tax to pay off outstanding debt, like what the county has already accrued for its elementary school renovation.

Regardless of whether the referendum passes, there's still work to be done, Jones said.

"Our next big facility that we want to look at is our high school. It's a dated facility. ... The last renovation was done in the late '90s, so we need to do some work on that," he said. "We need to update the HVAC, the electrical, the classrooms. It needs a high school competition gym. Right now, we don't have that."

Staff writer Julianna Stephenson contributed information to this story.