

Diversion assessment passes with 'yes' votes mostly from Cass County, Fargo

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FARGO-The city of Fargo and Cass County weren't the only ones voting to finance the proposed Fargo-Moorhead flood diversion with a special assessment, but they made up the vast majority of "yes" votes, according to a preliminary vote tally Tuesday.

Seventy-nine percent of the 623 million votes returned were "yes" votes, the Cass County Joint Water Resource District said in a release. Of the 492 million "yes" votes, at least 87 percent belonged to the county and city, 1 percent belonged to other local governments and 12 percent came from owners of properties benefiting from the diversion.

If local governments didn't vote and left it to owners of benefiting properties, only 48 percent of those 119 million votes returned would have been "yes" votes, not enough to pass.

Only votes turned in by April 30 counted.

The number of votes is, by state law, unequal because it's based on the amount of money voters are liable for, with each dollar equal to one vote. Cass County is liable for \$242 million, for example, and Fargo \$185 million. A homeowner might be liable for just a few thousand dollars and have just a few thousand votes.

It's a point that has upset some local elected officials, who say the process is not democratic.

Democratic concerns

The West Fargo City Commission decided to vote "no" on the special assessment to send a message. Commissioners said with "yes" votes from Cass County and Fargo, the assessment was already guaranteed to pass. West Fargo's 45 million votes didn't matter.

Fargo City Commissioner Mike Williams, who initially agreed with the majority to cast a "yes" vote, later said he regretted it because of how little influence ordinary homeowners have.

Even without local governments' millions of votes, the group with the next largest number of were major businesses with expensive properties, such as hospitals and factories.

Vote tally

Diversion officials, including those with the Cass County water district, have said the special assessments will likely never be levied. They are needed to provide up to \$725 million in low-interest financing to pay the local share of the estimated \$1.8 billion diversion. The actual repayment will use Cass County and Fargo city sales taxes, which aren't ideal guarantees because the interest would be higher.

The local share of \$725 million translates to 725 million votes for those benefiting from the diversion and are liable for the assessment. A third of these votes went to property owners based on their property values and estimated benefit from the diversion. The remaining two-thirds went to local governments based on their populations.

Another 34 million votes went to owners of properties that might be harmed by the

project, particularly those upstream of a dam that would reduce the flow of water going into the diversion and through Fargo-Moorhead. Not all of these property owners voted "no." The water district didn't report how they voted but, by process of elimination, it appears about a fifth voted "yes."

Water district officials will meet at 8 a.m. Thursday at the county building in West Fargo to certify the vote.

Below is a breakdown of the preliminary tally provided Tuesday by the district.

Turnout

- 82 percent of the 759 million available votes for all voting classes were returned.
- 83 percent of the 725 million votes that went to those benefiting from the diversion, including property owners and local governments, were returned.
- 99 percent of the 483 million votes that went to local governments were returned.
- 49 percent of the 242 million votes that went to benefiting property owners were returned.
- 68 percent of the 34 million votes that went to those potentially harmed by the diversion were returned.

How they voted

- 79 percent of the 623 million returned votes for all voting classes were "yes" votes, 21 percent were "no" votes.
- 90 percent of the 480 million votes that went to local governments were "yes" votes, 10 percent were "no" votes. As noted, 427 million of these 480 million votes were "yes" votes from Cass County and Fargo and 45 million of these were "no" votes from West Fargo.
- 48 percent of the 119 million votes that went to owners of benefiting properties, which includes city and county properties, were "yes" votes, 52 percent were "no" votes.