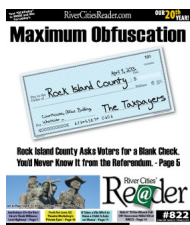


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If a government body wants to spend tens of millions of dollars for a construction project, there are lots of ways to gauge the public temperature.

It's hard to imagine a more roundabout approach than the one chosen by the Rock Island County Board.

Last week, the board voted to put a referendum on the April 9 ballot, and if your eyes glaze over while reading it, that might be the goal. The measure asks: "Shall the County Board of The County of Rock Island be authorized to expand the purpose of The Rock Island Public Building Commission, Rock Island County, Illinois to include all the powers and authority prescribed by the Public Building Commission Act?"

Of course, most people don't know what the Rock Island Public Building Commission is, or that it even existed – let alone its current or potentially expanded authority.

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And there's no way to know from the words what the endgame is. There's no mention of a new or renovated county courthouse or county office building, or of a location, or of a price tag – which could be anywhere from \$13 million (the low estimate for a new court facility alone) to \$50 million (the high estimate for a new courthouse and county office building in downtown Rock Island).

In short, the referendum appears designed for maximum obfuscation – a seemingly innocuous question about an obscure public body. The move could easily be interpreted as a deceptive attempt to gain public support for something the public otherwise might not support.

In fairness, the ultimate goal hasn't been hidden from view, and nearly everybody [agrees](#) that both the courthouse and the county office building need to be replaced or upgraded.

But given the taxpayer money at stake, what's behind the strangely circuitous approach of Rock Island County government?

The primary reason is that the judiciary has taken the lead and is forcing the issue because the county board has dragged its feet for two decades.

Two other reasons are key: Expanding the authority of the Public Building Commission could keep property taxes level – or at least minimize the amount of a property-tax increase – while resulting in new (or, in an unlikely scenario, rehabilitated) county facilities; and, if the referendum passes, county-board members can claim that approving tens of millions of taxpayer dollars was sanctioned by voters.

There are still other reasons below the surface. The vagueness of the referendum makes its passage more likely than a traditional bond referendum (in which the projects and costs would be clear to taxpayers). And the authority that would be granted by this referendum gives the county significant flexibility moving forward – both with the two buildings being discussed now and any major capital projects it wants to pursue in the future.

Maximum Obfuscation: Rock Island County Asks Voters for a Blank Check; You'd Never Know It from the

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