

St. Louis County senior tax freeze will cost public schools millions of dollars

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November 18, 2025

ST. LOUIS COUNTY — Area school districts will forego nearly \$20 million in the first year of St. Louis County's senior freeze on property taxes.

The freeze comes as many area school districts already are grappling with budget shortfalls caused by rising supply prices, higher healthcare and staffing costs, declining enrollments and the end of pandemic relief funds.

More than [80,000 senior homeowners](#) applied and 70,500 were approved to freeze their taxes to the amount they paid in 2024. Property owners can apply for renewals annually.

This year is the first the credit will be realized on tax bills [after a 2023 law](#) allowed counties to enact property tax freeze programs for seniors.

Across the county, public school districts will receive \$19.6 million less in revenue from property taxes this fiscal year. The amount accounts for more than half of the total \$30 million seniors saved in the first year of the tax break, county officials said Monday.

County officials released [official figures](#) on the freeze's impact on Nov. 4. Until then, school districts only had estimates when calculating their budgets for this school year.

Rockwood, the largest school district in the county, will see a \$4 million decrease, the largest loss among the 24 school districts in St. Louis County. The district originally projected it would take in [\\$7.2 million less](#) this year due to the freeze.

Property taxes comprise 64% of Rockwood's \$358.5 million in revenue, according to the district's [budget](#). Local property taxes are a primary source of support for day-to-day school operations, which includes teacher salaries, classroom supplies, instructional materials and building maintenance.

Voters earlier this month [rejected a proposal](#) to raise Rockwood's property tax rate by 45 cents per \$100 assessed valuation, which the district had said primarily would be [used primarily for teacher salary increases](#).

"We respect the rights of those valued members of our community who qualify for the freeze and the tax relief it provides for them," Rockwood leaders said in a statement. "We are confident that by working together, we can navigate this challenge while continuing to uphold our mission of educational excellence."

Residents older than 62 can apply for the tax break annually. Taxes will be frozen at a "base year," or the year seniors apply for the freeze.

Parkway will forego \$2.7 million in the freeze's first year.

However, "external pressures on our budget are increasing," Superintendent Melissa Schneider said in an email to district families last Wednesday. She cited rising costs of supplies, utilities and transportation.

"The tax freeze is just one more thing that will make balancing these and other priorities even more challenging in the years ahead," Schneider said.

Smaller school districts may have less financial leeway.

Riverview Gardens has [trimmed dozens of positions](#) and opted to [close an elementary school](#) as it works to rectify budget challenges amid ongoing enrollment declines. The 4,900-student district recently projected it would lose between 800 to 1,000 students in the next decade.

Riverview Gardens will receive \$105,125 less in revenue this year as it works to shore up an existing \$7 million deficit.

At a Board of Education meeting on Nov. 8, Chief Financial Officer Stephanie Terry said Riverview was approaching a "financial pressure point," with its current spending "not sustainable."

School districts in Missouri rely heavily on local funding, meaning their revenue comes mostly from local taxpayers, rather than the state or federal government.

Missouri [ranks 49th nationally](#) for its share of state funding to public schools, with 32% of per-student funding coming from Jefferson City, according to a 2021 report from the state auditor.

"When local revenue declines, districts like ours feel the impact immediately and acutely," Special School District of St. Louis County Superintendent Michael Maclin said in a statement.

Special School District runs two technical schools and provides special education throughout the county. It has the largest [budget](#) of any school district, with spending expected to reach \$620 million this fiscal year. Property taxes make up 57% of its revenue.

The district has worked to trim expenses amid budget deficits as high as \$74 million in recent years. Its most recent budget shows a deficit of \$36 million.

Special School District will lose out on \$3.3 million in the first year of the senior tax freeze.

"For SSD, a \$3.3 million reduction makes it even more difficult to sustain the services our students count on, especially at a time when student enrollment is increasing and the cost of providing specialized services continues to rise," Maclin said.