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Plans the Liberal High School “That” Liberal Band were making to take a cruise to Cozumel aboard the Carnival Triumph were not approved during Monday evening’s school board meeting. The objections centered on the students’ safety in Mexico and possible liability since the cruise involved international travel. Courtesy photo

Board worried something bad could happen out-of-country

By KEELEY MOREE • Leader & Times Band students’ hopes to sail the high seas towards Cozumel, Mexico, were put to rest after a failed vote by the USD No. 480 board of education.

The proposed trip would have taken place upon the Carnival Triumph ship which was recently adrift for five days after an engine room fire. The trip was scheduled for May 29 through June 4 and involved one day spent on the island of Cozumel.

“This has been a difficult trip to organize,” Liberal High School band director Lance Burnett said to the board. “Of course, I’m concerned about the condition of this ship, there’s no question about it. The cruise line and the travel agency are assuring me that repairs are going to be made.”

“I know it puts you in an uncomfortable situation, it puts me in an uncomfortable situation, as well, but I do have confidence that they’re going to get to the bottom of this,” Burnett added. “Machinery breaks down every day. We’ve experienced that over the weekend here at USD 480. What bothered me was their inability to deal with this crisis, and I hope that they have addressed their policies.”

Burnett went on to explain that during the planning phase, a deposit had already been made for the trip, but then the fire occurred. While there was a window of time where the deposits could

have been refunded without a cancellation fee, students and parents expressed interest in moving forward with the trip.

Board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott, who joined the meeting by phone, explained she was uncomfortable with an overseas trip.

“I have a concern with the district’s liability, especially, with travel out of country. What is to happen, number one, for the safety of our kids? I know that Cozumel is not the same as Juarez, but still, if any child were to come up missing or hurt, we would have to go through not just local police but through actual countries,” Sutherland-Abbott said. “I’m very concerned with our ability and with what the parents will sign off on – and how many adults we’ll have per child. These are teenagers, and we have to be prepared for even the worst.”

“I think the question would be what safeguards do you have in place to, hopefully, eliminate the chance of some kid coming up missing,” board member Dan Diepenbrock said.

Burnett explained that 14 parents would be attending as chaperones and that band trips have a history of high supervision.

“We’ll structure the activities very carefully on the island itself,” Burnett said. “On the cruise ship, I’m not too worried about that. There will be check-in times. Whenever we travel, we’re pretty well structured.”

Board vice-president Steve Helm asked whether the State Department had any travel warnings issued for Cozumel. Director of federal programs Sheri King searched online and advised the board that no warnings had been issued for the area.

“I’ve never had any problems with us traveling anywhere in the United States that the kids fundraise for, but I think it’s a totally different game when we take them off the United States soil,” Sutherland-Abbott stated.

Diepenbrock asked further into the student release forms and whether parents were being informed of risks involved.

“We have a lot of their parents along with us, actually,” Burnett explained.

“I’m not so concerned about the ship because they’re going to do their darndest to make sure that baby’s ready to go,” board member Chris Jewell added.

“They’re off the ship one day and there are 14 adults. That’s one adult per three students,” board member Cheryl Louderback commented.

Diepenbrock asked what the students’ day on Cozumel would look like. Burnett explained that the day would be highly supervised and might involve a trip to the ruins, a volleyball tournament and opportunity to enjoy the island.

“My biggest concern, Lance, is just the timing,” board president Delvin Kinser said. “I know that with the trouble they had on the ship that may have messed up the way this was planned and put together, but I really think that this is something we should have been talking about months ago.”

“I agree, but I don’t feel like I can sit here and play God and say, ‘No, you can’t.’ I feel like if the parents – it’s not my child so how do I have the right to say, ‘I won’t let you.’ I feel like I’m trying to invade in personal matters,” Louderback said, adding that, “My heart is beating 90 miles an hour right now trying to figure out how I need to vote on this, but I just don’t think I can say, ‘No, you can’t go.’”

“I know that those adults will go and do their most darndest job to try to make sure those kids are safe, but I also know that kids are teenagers and given the most perfect set of situations, sometimes things will happen,” Sutherland-Abbott said. “I, with a clean conscience, don’t know that someone in a foreign country can take care of our children or would care to take care of our children. Not that I don’t support these band kids, because I do, I just wish that it would have been brought to Mr. Stout’s attention and to the board’s attention well before this so we could have looked into it a lot better and had time to really feel good with a clean conscience about the decisions that we’re going to make. I think that it is our responsibility as a board to make sure we do whatever is in our childrens’, parents’ and our district’s best interests. I’m not saying that we don’t rule out the parents, but this is a responsibility that will ultimately fall back on the district. If something was to happen to any child, it would be on our shoulders.”

“That’s always the case, although not necessarily,” Diepenbrock said. “Just because something bad happens, the district is not automatically going to be liable. It’s only if somebody is negligent or reckless. That’s why it’s important to have a sufficient number of chaperones, which it sounds like you have and it’s important to have the paperwork and the parents know what the risks are when they sign the releases. Yeah, something bad could happen in Mexico and something bad could happen in Dallas. It’s easier to get home from Dallas than it is from Mexico, but Cozumel has a profound interest to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

With the absence of Nick Hatcher, the remaining six board members cast their votes. Sutherland-Abbott, Kinser and Helm voted against the trip, while Jewell, Diepenbrock and Louderback voted in favor. In the case of the tied vote, the trip to Cozumel was rejected.

Following the vote, an e-mail from Burnett indicated that he will be working to recoup the group’s registration fees and would begin to start planning a new trip with a destination inside the U.S. as soon as possible. The band trip is funded by fundraisers such as Blue and Gold food sales, poinsettia sales and the annual fish fry which takes place Thursday evening.

“We respect the decision of the BOE,” Burnett added.

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