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EDITOR'S NOTE: To watch a full video recap of the USD 480 forum, visit bit.ly/11efnYK on a computer or stop by our Facebook page for a link to Monday night's broadcast. You must view the video on a computer. Be sure to visit hpleader.com tonight and click on the City Commission broadcast link to watch the forum live from 6 to 8 p.m.

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times There are 19 temporary buildings in the Liberal school district which house a total of 38 classrooms. They are also called portables.

Some in the community believe that is a problem that needs to be fixed, and candidates in the race for three seats on the USD No. 480 Board of Education gave their thoughts on the security and learning conditions of those buildings in one of the questions asked at Monday's forum at the Rock Island Depot.

Contrary to others, candidate Tammy Williams did say there can be advantages to having students outside of the district's main school buildings.

"Kids do good in that atmosphere," she said. "Sometimes, it gets them out of the main classroom so they can learn other things and be able to think a little bit differently."

Candidate Crystal Clemens felt having portables is a problem to which a creative solution needs to be found.

"I think we're going to have portable classrooms until we start looking outside of the box in what we're going to do," she said. "Our schools are going to have to grow. It needs to be something we can afford and something voters will approve. I think the big question is whether we're going to support a bond issue and what do we think of security. I think we have to figure out a plan

that will meet our needs as a school district but not be such a tax burden to the taxpayers. Until that time, we'll have portables. That's the only answer we have."

The lone incumbent in the race, Nick Hatcher, said having portables is appalling, and the buildings have been in place since his days as a student.

"When people come to our community, they look at our hospitals, our schools, our streets, our local government," he said. "When we have portable classrooms that are a mainstream part of our so called solution for overcrowding and we haven't done anything about it for a number of years, it's appalling. We don't have adequate fences. We don't have adequate locks. The structures to learn in are not adequate. We're getting ready to spend a lot of money on roofs and heating and air conditioning, and to me, I think that's a waste of our taxpayers' dollars. Those dollars should be spent on brick and mortar and better classrooms."

Candidate Matt Friedrich said he is not a fan of the security conditions in the buildings.

"There's no central location at all," he said. "The access points to those are not what I consider secure environments for our children and our faculty. I think they're very inefficient for our district, but I also understand that's the card we are dealt with. Going forward, that would not be a goal of mine to continue to have those in the district."

Candidate Travis Combs said he feels students in portables are outside of the mainstream educational community.

"When students are put into a portable out at the end of the playground or beside the schools, they are not part of that school," he said. "I feel they might sometimes feel that way. As far as the security, we have a lot of kindergarten and pre-K students who are in those portables."

The next question dealt with a similar issue. Candidates were asked what they would do to reduce expenses in the district without hurting the education of the students.

Clemens said she could not think of something that could be cut from the USD 480 budget.

"I think the school has held a tight line for several years," she said. "Can we really afford to reduce anymore than we already have? Are we going to cut teachers' salaries? Are we going to cut more classrooms? I don't think I have a good answer for that right now."

Hatcher said listening to those working in the district is a good starting point.

"What I would suggest and recommend is relying on the staff and administration that we have in the district to point out those areas where we can have those reductions," he said. "That's the first line of defense in that topic."

Friedrich said changes in the way youth learn in the district could be an answer.

"I think going forward, the vision I see is a lot less books and a lot more electronic versions of

those,” he said. “I know we’re gearing up that direction for our district. Do I know how much those are? I don’t know what electronic books are versus paperback books. The other things I see are activity expenses. I see sometimes, we are taking a bigger vehicle than what we have to. I think long term to reduce those huge activity buses that we have to maybe have some more efficient vehicles in the district.”

Combs said cutting expenses and contributing a quality education to young people is a balancing act.

“I don’t know that you can reduce expenses for the district and still provide the adequate education that the students in this district deserve,” he said. “One thing that can be looked at is some of the trainings that teachers are put through that have no meaning to them. When they’re pulled out of the classroom, it is time they could be teaching their students.”

Williams agreed with her fellow candidates, saying she does not believe expenses can be reduced any further than they already have.

“The school board and the school district right now do a great job with their finances,” she said. “They keep everything structured. I know there’s more needs that we need in the school buildings and funding. I don’t know that there is a way to reduce anything.”

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