

## Public prefers sales tax over property tax increases

By RACHEL COLEMAN

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As a public school district, USD No. 480 belongs to the people of Liberal. That's why it makes sense to ask the community what it wants, especially as continued growth demands construction and expansion in the near future.

That was the reasoning behind a recent survey conducted by the architectural firm DLR and USD 480 administration. The Summer 2013 Patron Telephone Survey was released at the USD 480 board meeting July 9 and posted on the district's website where it can be viewed by the public.

Superintendent of schools Paul Larkin said the survey provided clear insight into what people in Liberal want from their schools, and how they'd like to move forward.

"The survey reached 365 randomly selected people, who were asked to prioritize ideas the district is considering," Larkin said. He noted that the options listed came from community panels, not the central office. "We asked people if they believe these are real needs and if so, how would they support paying for them."

Storm shelters topped the list, with 91 percent of respondents ranking that item first. In a related priority, eliminating modular classrooms through building expansion came in second, with 86 percent of the people surveyed. Security system upgrades, all-day kindergarten, and district preschool filled out the list.

The rankings weren't much of a surprise to administration. Following national news of tornado fatalities and school shootings, people are concerned about safety, said Larkin. Locally, the dearth of preschool and daycare programs has prompted a renewed interest in all-day kindergarten and expanded preschool services.

However, the big surprise in the survey related to funding. With mill levy amounts rising, those surveyed said the first choice to raise money for the district would be a sales tax of some sort.

"Overwhelmingly, sales tax was preferred, with a combination of a sales tax and property taxes second," Larkin said. "Funding the needs through property taxes alone was the least attractive option to the people we surveyed."

The public's preference does not mean the district can easily oblige.

"Only the city or county have the authority to issue a sales tax," Larkin said. "It's not something the school district has the authority to do, and we are very sensitive to the fact that the city has needs, too."

Director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey said he is hopeful the district and the city might be able to explore areas of mutual benefit.

"Believe me, I understand the challenges the city faces," he said. "They have old stuff, too. It's not easy to maintain a huge system with limited funds, and everyone's doing their best to meet the needs. One thing I hope we can talk about is areas where we overlap — things the city wants for the community that maybe the district can help with, if we are willing to brainstorm."

Larkin said the district and city have already made great strides in working together on projects such as the truancy program, which replaced less successful efforts by the Tri-Agency model used in the past.

“We’ve seen a lot of success in terms of reducing truancy and improving graduation rates, lessening the burden on the judicial system,” Larkin said. “It’s amazing how well we work together.”

For now, the district and DLR continue to reach out to the community to get a sense of how people in Liberal want their school district to operate.

“We have gotten a lot of input from teaching staff, parents and community members who are part of our focus groups,” Burkey said. “The goals listed on the survey came from that group, the vision group. That group does not include people from the central office. They are community members and stakeholders. They dream a lot, and they’re looking at all kinds of stuff, but the important thing is, they are speaking up and they are a key part of this process.”

In light of the fact that the last school bond issue presented to voters failed, Burkey and Larkin are determined to find a better path for the district, and its taxpaying supporters.

“We’re making a huge effort to listen to the public,” Larkin said. “For anything to succeed, it has to be driven by the community, and it has to benefit the entire community. That’s what we all want.”