School board, city commission meets tonight to explore collaborative approach to district's needs

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Both governing bodies have plenty to manage, yet the Liberal City Commission and the USD 480 School Board have carved out time for a special meeting tonight. The boards have scheduled a work session at 5:30 p.m. in the City Commission Chambers, at 325 N. Washington, at the request of the school board. The session is intended to start conversation about the district's needs, the community's needs and possible areas where the two overlap.

At its Aug. 5 board meeting, the school board agreed to invite the city to join in the conversation about what Liberal's schools and students need.

"Everyone has needs right now," noted USD 480 director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey. "The city has old stuff; we have old stuff. Maybe there are areas where we can help each other out."

District superintendent Paul Larkin emphasized that USD 480 hopes a collaborative approach might benefit both bodies.

“Ultimately, a strong school district is an asset to the entire community,” he said. “It connects to economic development opportunities, quality of life, retention of young people who graduate.” In practical terms, he said, the district is hopeful that expanded facilities, which schools desperately need, might overlap with needs in the community, perhaps by offering storm shelters or additional gymnasium space.

However, at such an early stage, no one wants to move ahead of the community.

“Nobody has a plan, right now,” said USD board president Delvin Kinser. “I think a lot of people know we have needs, but there’s no preconceived idea or plan about how to move forward. I think this is a matter of getting the discussion going.”

Longtime USD 480 board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott has regularly voiced concerns about the community’s response to mill levy increases. It’s what caused the last bond issue the school district attempted to fail, she has said, “and the last thing we want to do is alienate people.”

Accordingly, the district has sponsored community focus groups to collect ideas from parents, teachers, taxpayers and business owners. None of the focus groups have included administrative staff members, noted Burkey.

“We invited many, many people, so that it’s the community talking, not the administrators,” he said.

As budgeting season continues, the school district, community college, county and city have all raised mill levy collection amounts. Finance directors say the primary reason for the increases goes back to changes in property assessments, primarily in the oil and gas industries.

Meanwhile, property tax valuations for homeowners have gradually increased.

A community survey conducted by the district indicated that most voters favor a combination of funding sources for new facilities, preferably a blend of sales tax revenue and property taxes. Even so, Larkin noted, the school district has no authority to levy sales taxes.

“That’s something only the city and county can do, so we’re opening the conversation,” he said. “Hopefully, we can start to find solutions that will benefit the entire community.”

As with all meetings involving elected boards, the work session is open to the public.