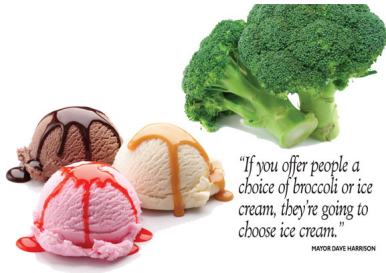


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School, city begin discussion

By RACHEL COLEMAN

Leader & Times

They came for conversation, but rapidly ran into survey skepticism. USD 480 school board members met with the Liberal City Commission Thursday evening for discussion about the district's growing needs, and the possibility of the two governing bodies collaborating to meet them. Nearly 30 citizens attended, filling the commission chambers. While the mood remained civil throughout the presentation, moods appeared to bristle a bit during follow-up comments and questions.



City Mayor Dave Harrison and City Manager Mark Hall questioned the validity of a survey conducted on behalf of the district. USD 480 board members defended the survey, saying it reflects the wishes of the people of Liberal.

Before the argument, however, the board outlined a proposal for creatively financing a potential bond issue in the next four years.

“We’d like to propose to you an initiative that would be beneficial for the school and for our city as a whole,” said USD 480 board president Delvin Kinser. “This is a great time to be in Liberal, Kansas. We have a growing community, and that growth is creating some important challenges for all of us. Finding solutions to the problems we face together, in a collaborative way, is the Liberal way.”

The USD 480 board hoped to convince the city commission to help create a financing package for an upcoming bond issue. Voters, the school board believes, prefer a combination sales tax/property tax source of funding to simply raising the mill levy in order to pay for school improvements. Because school boards are not permitted, by Kansas law, to levy sales tax increases, raising money in this way would require the city to approve and support the effort. In turn, the sales tax increase would appear on the ballot in a special election, giving voters and taxpayers the final say.

The district isn’t asking for open-ended promises, said superintendent of schools Paul Larkin.



“We wouldn’t want to ask for a blank check,” he said, noting that the district has yet to finalize expansion plans and prices. “We’re still in the visioning stages, asking the community for input about what they want.”

City commissioners listened to the presentation with little reaction, until Harrison and Hall expressed doubts about a community survey conducted by the Kansas company, Patron Insight of Stilwell.

Taken in June, the five-minute telephone survey contacted 365 respondents — a number judged by standard statistical data to be representative of the 7,000 registered voters in the district. Participants were asked about their wishes for the district, whether they agreed with priorities listed by a focus group of business owners, teachers, students and parents, and, if so, how they would prefer to finance expansion. The residents were randomly selected from a list of registered voters, all of whom had lived in Liberal for 10 years or longer.

Harrison and Hall said they didn't place much confidence in the survey. School board members and administration defended the reputation of the surveying company, and explained how and why the survey asked what it did.

"Whoever did the survey, did they explain that [the school district] cannot offer a sales tax?" Harrison asked.

"I've received calls from people who say it was never explained to them," Hall said, adding that "people have told me they were never asked if they were registered voters."

USD 480 board member Crystal Clemens, who works in the county election office, explained that all respondents were randomly selected from the county's list of registered voters. Hall maintained that some survey respondents "were never asked on the phone if they were registered."

However, city commissioner Ron Warren, a survey participant himself, said he was "pretty sure they asked me about that," when he completed the five-minute survey.

"Do you think we need to throw the survey out and start all over again?" asked USD 480 board member Matt Friederich.

“Well, you keep saying, ‘the community wants this,’” Hall said, “but the survey was biased. There is no way to prove any of the 365 people could even vote.”

“If you offer people a choice of broccoli or ice cream, they’re going to choose ice cream,” said Harrison.

“We have confidence that the numbers are valid,” Kinser told the commissioners. “The company is reputable, they use the same methods as the Gallup Poll and data analysis approaches from Rutgers University.”

USD 480 board member Nick Hatcher also defended the survey results.

“It’s overwhelming,” he said. “The survey said 85 percent of the people want us to finance school improvements through a combination of property taxes and sales tax. That’s what I hear from people in the community. It’s come up over and over as I talk to people. We are trying to do what we’re told. That’s enough for me to come here and sit down and try to put something together.”

In the end, Harrison told the school board members, “what you’re asking us about is finance.” All the commissioners care about education, he noted, and most of them probably voted in favor of the last bond issue, which failed. But the problem is not about what would make a great school system in the city, he said, it’s about how to pay for it: “It’s almost like you’re asking us, how much money can we have?”

Not so, replied Kinser and Larkin. It would be presumptuous, they said, to show up at the city with a project and price tag, without having discussed the project collaboratively, ahead of time. USD 480 board member Steve Helm agreed, noting that “we can give you access to everything we’ve heard and said about this project.”

At this stage, Kinser said, “if there is a part of you that says, ‘I’d like to do this, but—’ then we

still have something to talk about. If you reach a point where you, as commissioners, say, 'I don't want to do this,' then that's different."

What the school board does want, Kinser said, "is for the people of Liberal to have the opportunity to decide the issue. We believe we can trust them."

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