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By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

As USD 480 prepares to bring a bond issue to voters in order to expand district facilities, everyone involved wants to avoid what happened last time — rejection.

In 2009, voters refused to pass a \$61.275 million bond issue.

“There was a lot of stuff in that last bond issue that people felt was not necessary,” said USD 480 board member Chris Jewell in a recent work session.

Chief among the items perceived as frivolous? A new artificial-turf football field, with an upgraded track and bleachers. When the voters rejected the bond issue, the school board opted to construct new athletic facilities anyway, with other funding.

Following the failed bond issue and the installation of new football facilities, constituents then demanded a vote, by petition, on the district’s proposed mill levy increase — which voters also rejected. The decision cost the district \$750,000 in taxes it had expected to collect for its regular operations.

In a 2009 interview with The Hutchinson News, petition organizer Steve Helm, who later won a seat on the school board, said the “trust factor was gone. Voters remember things like that.”

So do administrators, board members and architects. That's why they're determined to deal with reality and make better decisions the second time around.

During a work session in 2012, DLR senior principal John Fuller told the board bluntly that it must do better if it hopes to pass a bond issue.

"... in 2009, when your previous bond failed, what did you tell the public was going to happen? And did you follow through on that? Weren't we going to fund a high school football field turf with that bond? We found another way to do it without having a bond, right? That's the consequences of a bond failure where credibility gets shot," Fuller said.

At the same board meeting in Dec. 2012, board member Delvin Kinser agreed.

"I hope that we've been starting to build it back since the last election. I know that we still have a lot of work to do in that regard because there are still folks in the community that bring that up," Kinser said.

This time around, the board is aiming for a transparent, community-driven approach. That begins with the "Vision Team," a group of community members meeting monthly to discuss district needs and explore solutions for the district's main needs: overcrowding at every school building in town, a steadily-increasing student body, and safety concerns about portable classrooms that provide little shelter in case of tornadoes.

"Our hope is that we'll get a vision that the community gives credence to," explained DLR community consensus builder Penny Ramsey in May 2013.

At last week's meeting, DLR representatives reviewed potential expansion plans brainstormed by team members the month before. The plans centered on how and where students should be educated: in elementary schools holding grades K to fifth, or K to sixth, with or without preschoolers? In one large middle school, housed in the building that is currently the high

school? Or in the existing middle school buildings, with renovations to expand space? Should the district put sixth graders in a separate wing with older middle school students, or keep them with elementary peers? And what about high school? Should the ninth graders occupy a separate wing, or stay with everyone else? If a new building is needed, should the district continue to use the costly performance and athletic competition spaces already in place? Should the district open a preschool center in one of the buildings currently used for grades K-3?

As Vision members voted on what they thought the community was most likely to approve, lively discussion focused on the topic of setting reasonable goals. City commissioner Janet Willimon expressed concern about high price tags for new buildings.

“The Rotarians, the PEO club members, the older people in town, the property owners — people who are 60 and over, they are the ones who are voting,” she said. “They still call our high school building, ‘The New High School,’ and they don’t want to pay for something they believe is unnecessary.”

Casey Mein agreed the group should avoid plans that would be seen as too ambitious.

“We can’t start shooting for the stars,” he said. “Maybe we should shoot for something we can actually get done.”

For many, a more moderate approach involved repurposing or adding on to existing buildings in the district.

But county administrator April Warden pointed out that she’s found out firsthand that it can be more expensive to renovate old buildings than to simply start from scratch. That was how the new county administration building came to be, she said.

“There are all kinds of things that happen, that people don’t think about,” she said. “It costs way more to remodel than to build new.” New does not have to mean luxurious, she added.

“You can have a nice building without it being all brick and marble,” she said.

Group member Amy Hinkle talked about the problems of how the community perceives the choice to build new structures. That can be seen as excessive, she noted, “but if you do nothing significant, just adding on here and there, it’s like putting Band-Aids on the problem.”

While the Vision Team has yet to propose clear options for the district’s needs, the group is looking ahead to gathering more information from parents and taxpayers in the community. Within a month, DLR reps said, “you should go out and talk to more people, and listen to their feedback. Then, two weeks later, do it again,” said Brad Kiehl of DLR.

Kiehl suggested evening meetings on weeknights, at locations that would be easy to access and appeal to a wide spectrum of people.

The notion of casting a broad net and listening carefully is a key part of the process. Originally, board members warmed to the idea of “going to where they (voters) are, not holding a meeting somewhere and inviting them. We need to go where they’re meeting, where they’re talking and outline for them at that place what our needs are and the kinds of challenges that we face to let them see it first hand,” Kinser observed (in the 2012 work session).

The Vision Team meetings thus far have been scheduled over the lunch hour on weekdays, often running longer than an hour. Held in the basement conference room at First National Bank, the meetings are primarily attended by business people — some of whom are parents — along with a few elected officials, and some district employees and USD 480 board members.

“I wish there were a few more community members in that group,” said the DLR rep. “A lot of the people in that room are drinking the Kool-Aid.”

In the meantime, the district’s website offers an online survey for patrons to voice their opinion. The public is invited to participate by visiting www.usd480.net, and clicking on the panel labeled

“USD 480/Community Facility Planning Process,” marked by an icon with two men in yellow hard hats. A survey with 20 questions will collect information about what patrons think of the district as it is, and what they would like to see in the future.

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