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By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

After several months of studying the question, “What’s next for the district?” USD 480 will ask the community. A series of 13 public meetings set for Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of next week will give the public a chance to speak up, ask questions and maybe even dream big.

Public relations director Jason McAfee released the schedule Thursday, noting that the district “wants to respond to the community needs, and together, the community and district will improve the educational environment for its students.”

The district’s VISION team, working closely with architectural firm DLR, has done a lot of the

groundwork. Using data collected from a phone survey of more than 300 Liberal voters, local maps, visits to district school buildings and more, the group discussed how school in Liberal should work. Should elementary schools return to a K-6 model? Should the middle schools be combined? Is it smarter to build on to existing structures, or construct something new? What is the best way to get rid of modular classrooms?

Along the way, the VISION team, USD 480 board and administration stressed one key concept: it's going to be up to the people of Liberal to answer those questions, and decide what to do.

Now, said director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey, it's time to find out what people in USD 480 — parents, taxpayers, business owners and educators — want next.

"We are hoping to get a lot of community feedback," Burkey said.

At a VISION meeting earlier in October, team members worried that taxpayers might balk at the thought of a bond issue. To offset the financial burden on property owners, the school board proposed a sales tax component to help fund future building needs. Liberal City Commission members voted to approve the proposal, and gave the district the go-ahead for a special ballot initiative.

In a unanimous vote, the commission agreed to let the district put the question to voters: Should a one-half-cent sales tax be levied for 25 years or the life of the bond, whichever is less, pending voter approval of the bond itself?

That bond is yet to be determined, though, as McAfee stated in the press release, the problems are clear.

"USD 480 and the Liberal community are faced with several challenges. Overcrowding, aging buildings, and changing educational programs are impacting our students and teachers on a daily basis," he stated. "This is, and will continue to, financially impact the district with increasing operational costs in the following years unless we all can find a reasonable solution to improve resources, spaces, and facilities."

That reasonable solution must be a collective decision, he noted:

“Your input is crucial in developing a community-wide plan to improve our schools.”

Meetings are set for the following times at various locations: See chart above.

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