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Liberal High School students Alicia Collins, left and Kylie Evans take a close look at possible changes to middle school facilities in Liberal. Architects DLR created detailed graphic displays to help community members get a clearer sense of what lies ahead for Liberal's schools. The display boards will be used at 17 public meetings scheduled for the remainder of this week.
L&T photos/Rachel Coleman

Meetings aim to find out what voters want

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Using a set of brightly-colored display boards to illustrate the possibilities for district expansion, USD 480 and consulting architects, the DLR Group, will hit the town all week with a series of 17 public meetings. Their goal? Get a clear sense of what people in Liberal want to see happening in the overcrowded schools over the next few years.

“The intent of this is to give people a very quick snapshot of what we’re looking at with all these buildings,” said DLR architect Brad Kiehl. “We need their input about what’s best — is it best to build on to existing structures, or to build from scratch? What price tag are we looking at? What are the needs?”

Kiehl was speaking to nearly 40 members of the VISION group, comprised of community members, parents, business owners, educators and students, at a noon meeting Monday.



“You guys are kind of the guinea pigs,” he said. The same information he introduced will be presented, and the same questions asked, at meetings all over Liberal this week. VISION members spent about 15 minutes examining the display boards closely, and tagging options they favored with sticky notes. DLR will repeat the process with community members all week — the more the better, Kiehl said:

“We don’t want to get out there and have people thinking, ‘Oh, it’s already been decided.’ Nothing has been decided. That’s what we’re waiting for them to do.”

The information boards, with all their detail, primarily show choices and options — nothing definite.

“Part of the reason this is somewhat vague is that we want to get input,” Kiehl said.

However, a few foundational issues have become clear during the VISION process and the first round of community meetings.

Based on information gathered from the public and the VISION group itself, the district’s options appear to hinge first on how people want the youngest students educated. DLR representatives have heard many comments in favor of preschool and all-day kindergarten. Such programs would dramatically expand the district’s existing programs, so the need for one or two large pre-K centers is a possibility. These might be conducted in buildings that now function as elementary schools; Lincoln Elementary and Southlawn Elementary are two potential options.

The VISION group has also looked at reconfiguring Liberal’s current line-up of seven elementary schools and two intermediate schools into five expanded, kindergarten-through-fifth-grade locations.

Bigger questions loom about how to handle the problem of overcrowded middle schools and Liberal High School, which already contains more than 100 students over its capacity. The high school could function nearly “as is” if its ninth-graders were moved to a separate building, perhaps what is currently being used as West Middle School.

Some group members voiced a desire to combine the two middle schools in an entirely new structure, thus eliminating cross-town rivalry.

Others, like USD 480 board member Delvin Kinser, said the two-school system now in place offers benefits.

“I like having middle schools continue as a neighborhood-type thing,” he said.

“No matter what we do, there will be rivalry between schools and comparisons about which schools were improved or expanded,” said McDermott Elementary principal Kathy Fitzgerald.

VISION group member, parent and teacher Leann Hebbert asked about the many “repurpose” labels on buildings currently used as schools.

“There’s a whole lot of repurposing going on,” she said. “I’d like to see more specific information about what those buildings would be repurposed to.” She asked if unusable buildings could be sold.

At this point, Kiehl said, there’s not a plan set up, “except that we know we don’t want another ‘Old High School’ scenario, which we’ve talked about and heard about in the community.” Thus, buildings too old to be remodeled for their current purpose might be altered to be used for other district needs, or changed into something altogether different, yet beneficial to the community.

Amy Hinkle, a businesswoman who is also a parent and VISION group member, noted that while there are seven or more sites around town being used by the district for various purposes, “most people don’t even know or think about them.”

Director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey said repurposing a former school building might mean turning it into a parking lot, or a park, or apartments, or a church.

“It doesn’t have to be the district’s building,” he said.

“Some of that is discussion we’ll get into this week,” Kiehl replied. “We want to ask the public, ‘What does repurpose mean to you?’”

Questions like this are what the community meetings should answer.

District hopes for plentiful public input

Tuesday, 19 November 2013 11:00

“We’re not making these decisions,” Kiehl said, nor is the board of education, the district’s Central Office, or the school administrators. “We need to make sure people understand. We’re presenting options, we’re not making plans.”

The people of Liberal, DLR representatives said repeatedly, are the ones who will have to sign off on plans voters will approve.

Next USD 480 community meetings

Today

5:30 p.m. Depot Liberal Young Professionals

7 p.m. LHS (commons) Anyone

7 p.m. MacArthur (gym) Parents

Wednesday

7 a.m. Depot Anyone

Noon American Title SW Realtor's Board

12:30 p.m. Depot Chamber members

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