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District hopes to save money, regain voter trust

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

J.E. Dunn may be a multi-billion-dollar contracting firm listed on the Forbes 200, but the Kansas City-based business is still a family venture at heart, said executive vice president William Dunn Jr.

“We take every job personally,” he said at a Monday meeting of the USD 480 VISION team, charged with developing a plan for Liberal’s rapidly growing schools. “It’s in our blood. We have employees who are third- and fourth-generation. The quality these guys demand is off the charts.”

Dunn and his team of architects and project managers were in town to accept an offer from USD 480 to serve as the Construction Manager at Risk, or CMAR, for a possible bond issue. Voters who wonder why the district has hired a contractor when there is still no plan need not worry, said J.E. Dunn associates and superintendent of schools Paul Larkin.

“We’re being retained in a consulting capacity but unless the bond issue passes, there will be

no cost to the district,” said Steve Golubski, architect and company vice president. J.E. Dunn’s services to help develop a project scope and price estimate will be a no-risk matter for USD 480.



“J.E. Dunn is a little bit at risk,” Golubski said, “but it’s good for us; we’re experienced with that.”

Using a CMAR is a different model than the design-bid-build model typical of the past, and it’s well suited to Liberal’s school district where voters remain wary of big plans with big price tags. By working with a CMAR to translate public desires into plans on paper, the district hopes craft a bond issue voters can approve. A key part of that will be accurate cost estimates, followed by transparency as the project unfolds. Many voters still resent a bond issue that failed in 2009, after which several bitterly contested projects were completed with district funds.

“Because of the past history, this gives the people in the community an opportunity to get involved,” said Brad Kiehl of DLR architect/engineering group. Community meetings all week will gather information which will then be used to draft plans.

Director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey said using a CMAR is beneficial through the entire life of a big project. If and when a bond issue is approved, J.E. Dunn will oversee the building process. Only then will the construction firm be paid for its services. Burkey said retaining the firm is a win-win move.

“You don’t want to do a project this big piecemeal, on your own,” said Burkey. “It might seem like taking the lowest bid for everything is the best way to go, but it’s not. These guys, once the community says what it wants, can get the scope of the project and save us money.” In its last large construction project, Burkey said, USD 480 saved \$700,000 by using the services of a CMAR.

The CMAR system was approved by the Kansas Legislature in 2008 as an “alternative project delivery ... aimed at the successful completion of the design and construction of buildings ... (with a) team selected based on a qualifications and best value approach,” according to Senate Bill No. 485 (2008, later amended).

The American Institute of Architects notes that construction management at-risk is seen by many policy-makers and legislators as an innovative approach to public sector project delivery. The CMAR delivery method, AIA states, “is an alternative procurement process similar to long-standing private sector construction contracting. CMAR is a cost-effective and time conscious alternative to the traditional design-bid-build process.”

Results have been positive in other school districts. A \$12.8 million project in Independence, Mo., came in \$655,024 under budget in a project designed by DLR, the same architect/engineering firm working with USD 480. In Hutchinson, the district contemplated two methods to construct a new high school. The general contractor bid came in \$7 million over budget; a CMAR proposal came in \$337,000 under budget, and the high school opened in 2011.

Proponents say CMAR:

- Increases the speed of the project and strengthens coordination between architects/engineers and the construction manager.
- Increases collaboration between the managers, architects, engineers and the client.
- Ensures greater transparency. All costs and fees are in the open, which diminishes adversarial relationships between components working on the project.

“With traditional general contracting, you never get to see where the money went,” said Lynn Newkirk, vice president and the project director for Liberal. With CMAR, “everything will be an open book. People will get to see an accounting. One of the things we value most is transparency, to account for every dollar that was spent, and why. That’s part of our ‘have to do’

list.”

For the J.E. Dunn reps at Monday’s meeting, though, partnership with USD 480 had one simple focus: the students who will attend the schools they hope to help create.

“Everyone in the group we brought specializes in this kind of work,” Newkirk said. “We take on office buildings, hotels, even the cheese plant over in Hugoton ... but the group we brought to Liberal is focused on schools, K through 12. It’s all they do.”

As such, they enjoy working with staff, principals — and kids.

“There’s nothing better than watching a school open,” Newkirk said.

Golubski agrees. An architect by trade, he’s worked for J.E. Dunn for 20 years. His favorite project? An elementary school in Shawnee Mission.

“It was really nice, it won national awards. I liked it so much, I moved so my kids could go to school there,” he recalled. Years later — with several college degrees completed amongst them — he said his children still maintain it “was the best school they’ve ever attended. Better than going to a private school.”

“What a good school does is, it attracts good teachers, good principals, and then your kids end up with a better education,” he said. “I’ve seen it.”

Next USD 480 community meetings

Today

7 p.m. Billy's BBQ Anyone

Thursday

8 a.m. Depot Anyone

Noon Depot Anyone

5:30 p.m. Cottonwood (commons) Anyone

5:30 p.m. Southlawn (gym) Anyone

7:30 p.m. Salty Dog Beta Sigma Phi

7:30 p.m. Depot We The People

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