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This meeting of citizens was at MacArthur Elementary. Courtesy photos

Old-timers agree: school needs are real

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Longtime Seward County resident Jim Rice remembers the time his boyhood school became overcrowded.

“I went to Liberty School, a one-room schoolhouse,” he said. “All eight grades, a dozen or so of

us.”

When the student population increased, Rice recalled, “they doubled the size of the school. They added one room at the end, with a curtain to separate the two areas.”

More than 50 years later, Rice laughed at the simplicity of the solution.

“My dad was on the school board. They knew they needed more room,” he said, “so they built on.”

Rice’s own children are now grown, and he has no grandchildren enrolled in USD 480. Yet he sees a similar need in Liberal’s school system.



“People have got to realize how crowded it is in the schools,” said Rice. “There is a definite need.”

Rice, now Seward County Commissioner, joined a handful of We the People members at a public meeting Thursday evening at the Rock Island Depot. Part of an 18-meeting series that concluded Friday, the event provided a detailed look at those schools, and what might be done to solve the district’s problems.

“No matter what building you go to in the district, they’re all over capacity,” said Brad Kiehl, a

member of the DLR architect/engineering group charged with collecting opinions. “The board and the administration haven’t determined a priority to address first, because they’re waiting on community feedback.”

We the People member (and Leader & Times publisher and owner) Earl Watt said he’d attended several of the community meetings, “and I’ve kind of gotten the feeling that kindergarten through fifth-grade is a priority for people.” In part, Watt said, this makes sense because the elementary schools make up “the oldest and tiniest” buildings in the district.

“I went to Garfield back when it was a K through sixth-grade school,” Watt said. “Back then, we had 10 classrooms, a library, a music room ... now it’s K through third-grade, and they use the teacher’s lounge, the music room, and four trailer houses as classrooms because they’ve got 18 classrooms on that site.”

Watt wasn’t the only person in the room reminiscing about his experiences at district elementary schools. We the People member Gary Warden recalled attending McKinley School.

“It looked pretty much the same back then as it does now,” said the Seward County resident, now a grandfather.

Inside the district’s older buildings, however, much has changed, said We the People member Heather Watt.

“At McDermott and McKinley schools, they have two, or even three classes being held on the stage,” she said. “And at Cottonwood and Sunflower intermediate schools, they’ve had to find more space.” When those buildings opened 12 years ago, Heather Watt recalled, “they had an art room with a kiln, and they did some really neat projects with the kids. Now it’s a storage room because they don’t have space.”

Electives such as art, music and drama are some of the first things to go when space gets tight and teachers are overloaded with large classes, Kiehl noted.

“If you’re OK with that as a community, that’s great,” he said.

At meetings all week, however, DLR and USD 480 representatives heard people say it wasn’t OK to keep shortchanging students. At the MacArthur Elementary school meeting, 80 people showed up to listen to the options and offer their opinions. As one of the few elementary school properties with empty land surrounding it, MacArthur could be expanded or renovated. Not so Garfield, which occupies one square block, with no room to grow.

School board members Chris Jewell and Nick Hatcher attended the Thursday meeting, as part of the weeklong meeting marathon. Both said they’d heard a lot of talk about all-day kindergarten and expanded preschool services. What to do about Liberal’s two awkwardly-designed and overcrowded middle schools was another big topic of debate.

“Some people want to knock down everything but the gymnasiums, and rebuild classrooms on the same sites,” noted the DLR rep. “Others want to get rid of everything but the gyms, put in some green space and lease out the properties as recreational facilities. The split between the idea of one middle school or two middle schools is about 50-50.”

Solving such problems will require money — lots of it — and We the People group members wanted to know how much improvement and construction projects might cost.

“Do you have a ballpark figure?” asked one attendee.

“No one can really determine that until we know what the community wants,” responded Kiehl, “but whatever the amount of the bond issue, the state would automatically pick up about half that. Then the half-cent sales tax, if voters approved it, would run for the life of the bond and that could be around \$80 to \$100 million.”

DLR representatives have reminded people at the community meetings of the legislative timeline that will likely affect any projects in district’s future.

“There is an opportunity to take advantage of state aid, and that’s not going to last forever,” said Kiehl. For two years, the Kansas Legislature has debated pulling the plug on matching funds for school improvement projects and the issue is likely to resurface in the next legislative session. That means any plan USD 480 hopes to implement must be submitted by January in order to be grandfathered in, no matter what bills eventually pass in Topeka.

For now, however, the big questions are local. What do people in Liberal want? Will they vote for the half-cent sales tax? Will they vote for a bond issue?

“I think the school board may have to make it a ‘yes-yes’ proposition,” said Earl Watt. “In other words, if voters approve a bond issue but reject the sales tax, it’s a no-go.”

Jewell said the public-opinion process has given him hope that voters are more open to the possibility of a bond issue.

“I’ve been surprised at how positive people seem to be,” he said. He estimated 90 percent of the community members he’d heard speak at the meetings were in favor of a bond issue. “The visual aids DLR put together really help, so people can actually see what the situation is at each school,” he said. “I think people realize the price of doing nothing is terrible.”

“That multiples as time goes on,” added Warden.

“And,” said Rice, “you can only do nothing for so long.”

Community meetings draw more than 200 participants

Saturday, 23 November 2013 11:38

The next round of community meetings is set for Dec. 9 to 12, when DLR and USD 480 will present a compilation of the opinions gathered at this week's meetings. Options gleaned from public opinion will be up for a straight "yes" or "no" vote before the district moves ahead with actual plans, dollar amounts and deadlines.

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