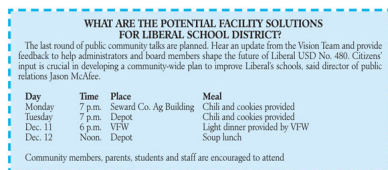


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Soup, chili provided

By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

The clock is ticking for USD 480 to assemble a plan for its facility needs — before the end of the year, before the deadlines for a special election in the spring, before matching funds from the state of Kansas are discontinued.

With plenty of public input, district officials and school board members are confident they'll make the deadline. A series of four meetings next week should help assemble the final details of a community-shaped plan.

“When you include the public in the process, they come up with the right solution,” said USD 480 director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey. “From June till now, the community has been working with us, and it’s been really great. It’s not us telling the public what’s going to happen. It’s people saying what they want, for their kids, for their community.”

When people say what they want, what they'll support, Burkey said, "it just works out better."

Next week's meeting should help move the district toward that positive outcome. Having gathered information through more than 30 town hall-style gatherings all over Liberal, DLR architects will present a few options for a bond issue. Using an anonymous audience response system that allows people to click on the options they like best, DLR will be able to collect real-time voting results.

"We'll be able to see what gets the most public support," Burkey said. "It's very, very important that we have people there."

With most people immersed in a hectic holiday schedule, he noted, "we know we're asking for a lot." That's why the meetings include hot food and a stripped-down time frame.

In Salina, where a similar bond issue is in the works, around 400 people showed up for a similar meeting, noted DLR representative Brad Kiehl.

"Those are the kind of numbers we want to see," he said.

Burkey is optimistic Liberal residents will show up and make their wishes known.

"This process has been exciting. From the first to second rounds of meetings, I was overwhelmed by the input, to see the progression of the community getting involved, hearing these incredible ideas," he said. "I usually sit in the background and just watch and listen."

In the process, he said, "My idea of the project scope always changes. People say, 'why don't we try this? Why don't we do it that way?' and those fresh eyes, fresh voices are very exciting."

“The community always comes up with the best suggestions.”

Following next week’s meetings, the board will hear results and a proposal for facility improvements. Burkey is optimistic that this time, a bond issue will succeed.

“Liberal is a great place to live. When we decide as a community what’s best,” Burkey said, “we go get it.”

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