



A large crowd gathers at the Rock Island Depot for the final public discussion of options to address possible expansion of schools. Those in attendance were able to anonymously select their preferences with remote control devices that linked their answers with the rest of the group, and the group responses were displayed to show which plans were preferred and which were rejected. The questions ranged from how to address the overcrowding issues as well as which plans were preferred in funding the upgrades. The DLR Group then compiled the responses with three previous public meetings earlier in the week and presented the data to the USD No. 480 School Board Thursday evening. For survey results, see Sunday's L&T. L&T photo/Earl Watt

No new high school building, keep two middle-school model

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Representatives from USD 480's architecture firm spent this week helping local residents sort through the options for improving the district's schools. Thursday night, they meet the school board to report what they learned.

Several things were clear. Chief among them:

“It looks like the majority of people in Liberal do not want to build a new high school,” observed board president Delvin Kinser. “And most of the folks like having two middle schools and don’t want to go to having just one.”

DLR Group’s Kevin Greischar agreed, based on responses from more than 150 patrons who showed up at the meetings.

“Option A seems to be rising to the top,” he said. Option B, which proposed a new high school, and one large middle school housed in the current LHS building, was the second most-popular choice. Greischar and his team presented five possible plans to district patrons at the meetings. While all the plans assumed the same approach to educating Liberal’s preschool and elementary-age students, they offered various choices for middle- and high-school education.

All the plans proposed a five-school approach for elementary grades K through five — new construction at the current MacArthur location, renovations at Cottonwood and Sunflower sites, and two completely new elementary schools. Each building would be enough to hold 528 children, with four classrooms at each grade level.

Option A proposed the construction of two new middle schools, each with a capacity for 660 students, one in the northwest area and one in the southeast area. For high school expansion, the district would continue to use the current building, renovating it along with what is now West Middle School as a ninth-grade center.

Unused buildings throughout the district would be repurposed. Because the size and location of the lots they occupy limits expansion, Garfield, McKinley and McDermott schools would be put to use “as is” for the district, with renovations happening as needed when capital outlay funds permit. Washington might be used as an adult education center in conjunction with Seward County Community College’s Colvin Center. Lincoln and Southlawn schools would be converted for use as preschool facilities. South Middle School might become a community recreation center for the south end of town.

As DLR representative Nicole Lopez told meeting participants throughout the week, “we don’t want another old high school, don’t want property abandoned. We know the community would not support driving past another empty building” as happened with the former high school building on Grant Avenue and Seventh Street.

At Thursday’s board meeting, both DLR staffers reminded the board that no action was required at this point.

“Really, this is an update for you to look at what the community has said,” Greischar said. “This isn’t a board of education-directed project, this is the community.”

In keeping with that publicly-crafted approach, DLR recommended the use of a second patron survey to be conducted before the end of the year. Working with Patron Insights, the architecture firm will put together a more detailed plan based on this week’s meeting results. Then, a survey of 365 Liberal voters will provide additional feedback to refine the plan.

Another step in the process involves development of a “Plan B” for the district, in case voters reject a bond issue.

“That’s one of the things we heard a lot,” Greischar said. “We need to tell people what we are going to do in the district if they vote ‘No.’ There needs to be strong trust, and it’s important for people to understand what happens if they don’t approve a bond.”

Board member Crystal Clemens said she wanted to avoid scare tactics in addressing that issue.

“I want to make sure that people don’t feel we’re bullying them,” she said. “It shouldn’t be threatening. It should be factual.”

Fellow board member Matt Friederich asked superintendent of schools Paul Larkin for clarity about what would happen if voters opt to do nothing in terms of district expansion. Larkin said it

would take time to provide solid numbers and scenarios, but off the cuff he noted some likely results from a “do nothing” approach.

“We’ll have to decide whether we want to stick with the benchmarks the board set for student-teacher ratios,” Larkin said, noting that overcrowded classrooms in every building would become even more packed. Forced transfer busing would increase. Additionally, all-day kindergarten would be impossible to offer.

“It’s vital for us to move in that direction if we ever want to close the achievement gap,” he said, pointing out that Liberal is one of only 13 school districts in the state that do not offer all-day kindergarten. “I don’t want that to come across as a scare tactic, but those are the kind of things we will have to address.”

“Some of the things the public say they want, won’t happen without the bond issue,” observed Kinser. “They need to be informed about what will happen.”

Though the board took no action, the patron phone survey — part of the original bond-issue plan crafted last summer — will proceed in the coming weeks, with input from DLR. The board will also meet Dec. 19 for a special meeting, check in with City of Liberal officials to share more information as it becomes available, and aim to create a solid plan before Jan. 20, the date to adopt formal actions laying out the scope of a project.

Common Goals

More than 1,000 people have attended meetings in the community since September, to discuss future needs for USD 480. Five priorities emerged from the citizen comments:

- Storm shelters for students

- More classroom space, especially at elementary-school level, eliminating all modular classrooms
- Improved security measures
- All-day kindergarten
- Expanded pre-K classes