



Vision Team tightens scope, price tag of bond issue

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

It wasn't the plan the Vision Team liked best. But the plan the community prefers for improvements to USD 480 facilities is the one to follow, said Patron Insights representative Rick Nobles at the Monday USD 480 board of education meeting.

"We have been (conducting surveys) for 20-plus years, we've worked with more than 100 school districts, and we track the results," Nobles said. "The school districts that follow the spirit of the research, 96 percent of them pass the bond elections."

Nobles defined "the spirit of the research" as a response to what surveys show.

“Basically, the district is telling voters, ‘we asked, you told us, we did that,’” he said.

What Liberal residents told the district over the Christmas holiday, was that voters are wary of higher property taxes. If offered a high-dollar bond issue — \$148 million in all — less than 50 percent would be in favor.

“They don’t want to pay higher property taxes, and they don’t see the need,” said Nobles.

Yet when the pollers described a less-expensive project that cost the average homeowner (that is, a home worth \$100,000) slightly less than \$10 per month rather than nearly \$15 per month, the approval rating climbed to 61 percent.

“If you went with the smaller plan and held the election today, you would win,” Nobles said. However, because the special election will not take place until early April, he warned, “You can’t just throw it out there. You will have to put together a campaign.”

Vision Team members, who attended the board meeting, were cautiously optimistic, despite feelings of disappointment about what the survey revealed. When they heard the Patron Insights presentation earlier that day, said Vision Team member Lisa Hatcher, “nobody said, ‘yea! This is exactly what we wanted.’”

The smaller project cut renovations to Liberal High School significantly, from \$22 million worth of improvements to about \$5 million.

“Cutting that chunk of money out of the high school ... they were concerned,” she said.

Even so, 40 of the 44 Vision Team members voted to recommend the smaller plan to the board.

As described by Kevin Greischler of architecture and engineering firm DLR, the trimmed-down plan “tightened everything down. The plan is intact at elementary and middle schools.” That would mean three completely new K-5 elementary buildings and some renovations to Cottonwood and Sunflower. The district would also build two new middle schools.

Bond issue money would not be used to renovate former elementary schools Lincoln and Southlawn into district preschool centers, though they might still be converted for that use. If so, they would get minimal change, and it would be handled with existing money from capital outlay expenses.

Liberal High School would access the former West Middle School campus, with renovations focused on exterior work to connect the two sites, as well as safety and security, Greischler said.

Even though he'd just whittled away at their original plan, Greischler praised the “visioneers,” as he called them.

“This responsibility was arduous, and they were gonna stick with it,” he said. After getting a good night's sleep, he said he hoped they'd feel more positive about the outcome:

“What you did was not easy. You have to listen to your community, ask for everyone's conversation and comment. Compared to what people started out thinking they want, and where we are today? I think it's a good process.”

USD 480 board member Chris Jewell agreed.

“I'm looking at it from the positive side,” he said. “We still came out of this with 85 percent (of what the higher-priced plan outlined). The most important things are still left.”

Vision Team member Ed Poley, a former USD 480 teacher and grandparent of three students

currently enrolled in the district, said he felt the current course of action, though bittersweet, is the best.

"I was in favor of spending a lot more money than this," he said, "but I'm a realist. If we don't get behind this plan, we're a long time out from seeing the kind of future we want."

Where do the survey numbers come from?

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Patron Insight, a Stilwell, Kan.-based company, claims that it knows taxpayers "inside and out."

"Since 1992, we've crawled around inside the heads of taxpayers, helping schools, hospitals, local governments and other entities understand what makes them tick, and what ticks them off," the company's website stated.

Using the same methodology as Gallup Polls, the Wall Street Journal and USA Today, Patron Insight calculates accuracy plus or minus five percent. What that means for Liberal is that 365 registered voters responded to a phone survey in December 2013. The respondents were: evenly distributed throughout the neighborhoods across Liberal; half were men and half were

women; came from different age groups and income levels; had lived in the community for varying lengths of time.

According to Patron Insight, "96 percent of the time, what we discover in our research is what it ends up being on Election Day."