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Local firms invited to bid on bond projects

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

If voters say “yes” to the school bond issue April 8, millions of dollars of construction work will kick off in Liberal. Though the contracts to build five completely new school buildings and renovate others will be huge in scope, local firms can still take part in the project. That was the message at a vendors’ luncheon last week, sponsored by USD No. 480 and construction manager JE Dunn.

“Our goal was to make contact with those local people and find out their contact information, their work focus, what they would like to do,” said JE Dunn vice president Steve Golubski. “If you’re an electrician, for instance, and you’re not large enough to take on all the work for a new school, but you want to be part of this project, we can break out a package for a \$100,000 job rather than the whole \$600,000.”

Local contractors frequently submit highly competitive bids, Golubski noted.

“They don’t have mileage costs, per diem reimbursement (for meals and housing provided to out-of-town workers), and their labor rates may be lower than someone who has union costs to consider,” he said. Additionally, “in the state of Kansas, there’s a little bit of favoritism for local contractors.”

USD 480 auxiliary services director Robert Burkey explained that state law provides an extra tool for districts that would rather hire local contractors.

“When bids come in close, within one percent, we have the option to go to our local contractors, share that information with them, and ask them to match the low bid with a like product,” he said. “That gives us the freedom to award the bid to local people.”

As much as he might want to, Burkey said he is not allowed to bypass the bidding process and arbitrarily award work to local firms.

“State statute requires us to go through the bid process,” he said. “Bidding is just so complicated. When the district makes decisions, it has to consider not just the up-front cost, but the life-cycle cost of certain projects. There are a lot of different ways to go, and the district’s goal is to make sure locals have every opportunity to be part of this job, even though it’s on a very large scale. We want them to stay as busy as they want to be.”

More than 40 people attended the Wednesday event, a turnout that pleased its organizers. Burkey listed builders, suppliers and even furniture salespeople among the guests.

“It’s in the best interest of the project to have local contractors involved,” Golubski said. “JE Dunn is the eighth-largest school builder in the nation, but what I told these guys was, ‘Don’t be afraid of us.’ We don’t want to come in and be the big guy in town. We don’t want people in Liberal to approve this, and then see the money go out of town for the five years it takes to complete the project.”

Benefits of hiring local go both ways.

“Actually, people who are vested in the community are going to give you a better product,” Golubski said. “They have to live in that community the rest of their lives. If you’re a plumber, for example, and the plumbing’s running uphill — well, everybody knows you did the work, the rumor mill gets going, and it’s a problem. Local contractors have more motivation to do the job right.”

JE Dunn views the construction process as an exercise in teamwork, Golubski noted, “and when we interface with local contractors, that helps us.”

The Wednesday luncheon provided a prime example.

“We learned from J&R Sand that it’s not economical to bring in limestone for aggregate,” used in mixing concrete or asphalt, Golubski said. “The costs for shipping in that rock from Wichita are too high. What they do out here is crush up mountain river rock.”

Such details, specific to a geographic region, are priceless.

“Those are the kind of things that may be unfamiliar to architects or construction managers,” Golubski said. “But the locals know, and when we interface with them, we save time and money.”

It’s not just JE Dunn that can learn as the process unfolds.

“This bond issue is a great opportunity for local guys to grow,” Burkey said. “Say you’re a local independent plumber. Can you give up your current customers for a year and a half to do this enormous job, and then expect them to be there for you when the project is done? No, but what

if you hire one or two extra hands to keep your customer base running, and free you up to be part of this project? There's a lot of opportunity, and that's what got me excited about it."

When the bond is successful, Golubski said, "we will keep having meetings." Contractors can expect hands-on instruction about how to submit bids, fill out paperwork and log into the project website.

For now, engineers at JE Dunn are working to find appropriate sites for the projects, arrange for infrastructure development and develop a sequencing plan and schedule. Golubski said architects, himself included, must form a clear understanding of how to phase the work so that the process unfolds smoothly. At the MacArthur Elementary School site, for example, an entirely new building will be erected, after which the current school will be demolished. Planners must decide when and how those projects will be carried out with minimal disruption to the educational process.

One set of calculations has already been finalized, though: the local economic impact of the bond issue.

"The architecture firm, DLR Group, hired Impact Data Source to find that out," Golubski said. "This bond issue will pump \$191 million into the local economy. That's everything from the hard costs of construction to soft costs — furniture, engineering fees, miscellaneous costs."

In terms of impact to individuals, Golubski added, "the project will create 434 jobs total during each year of construction."

As a newcomer who will spend considerable time in Liberal over the next five years, Golubski finds that prospect inspiring.

"It's a collaborative process, a community project that will be going on for several years," he said. Golubski himself got in the spirit last week, arriving in town a day early to participate in Pancake Day festivities.

“My mother has been talking about Pancake Day since I was a kid,” he said with a chuckle. “It was fun to finally tell her I was going to see it myself.”

The festivities lived up to his expectations.

“It was beautiful weather,” he said, “and watching the racers in their headscarves and fancy aprons — that was something. I thought it was great.”

Just as the Pancake Race brings international attention to the spectacle of a few Kansans racing down Lincoln Ave., Golubski said the huge scope of the bond issue boils down to local involvement.

“To be perfectly honest, we’re going to have a large scope of work,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean you’re too small to be part of it. Let us know what you can do, and we’ll match you up with a part of the project you can do. We have a desire to keep money flowing back into the local economy.”

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