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The schematic design process for three of the new USD No. 480 schools is moving fast – faster than what is usual for other school districts.

The design team with the architects for the school bond project, DLR Group, and various members of the school district and the community recently finished the schematic design phase for the schools at the Pine Street and Western Avenue sites. Pine Street will have a middle and elementary school, and Western will be a middle school only.

The district set up two groups to work on school design: one to focus on the middle school design and one to focus on the elementary school.

“We suggested that they include key administration, key teachers – for example, at the elementary, that would include a kindergarten teacher, first grade, second grade, so on... as well as any students who demonstrate leadership skills and speaking capabilities,” DLR Group Principal, Brad Kiehl, said. “Also any parent or school organization groups that wanted representation, which could include the community. So a pretty broad spectrum.”

The architects wanted to include members of the community into the process so the design could be specialized to the needs and desires of the people who will be utilizing the schools.

“Sitting down with these specialized design teams, we can tailor the program spaces to those exact needs in the community,” Kiehl said. “So it’s defining those specialty areas; for example, the programs with English as a Second Language. That’s more prominent in Liberal due to the different ethnicities that are in the community. So we want to tailor those program spaces to meet those educational needs.”

The phases the DLR Group has set forward to keep design and planning on track starts with schematic design. This phase includes “confirmation of the program spaces that are going to be involved and how they all fit together, as well as how they’re going to lay out on the site,” according to Kiehl.

The second phase is design development, which designates what each space is for and what will be put into those spaces in accordance to the overall structure of the school. These two phases are where all the major decisions are made. Anything changed later than that, and the project is at risk for cost increases and extended schedules.

The third phase is construction documents, where “the teams are just doing the detailing of the documents to give all the bidders the necessary information they need to identify the scope of the project and give good cost projections to base their contracts on,” Kiehl said.

During the schematic design process, a few changes were made in terms of the school's program areas. At the start of the bond project, the total area was set at 71,744 square feet for the elementary school and 97,386 square feet for the middle school. After the schematic design process, the elementary school prototype has been reduced to 70,866 square feet and the middle school has increased to 108,762 square feet.

"'Prototype' means that these schools have been built for other districts, and based on Liberal's needs, the two prototype designs… fit the district's program pretty well," Kiehl said. "The middle school allows the district to look at potentially adding another classroom wing in the future, should enrollment continue to grow, and will allow them the flexibility to manage their elementary school enrollments as well as their middle school enrollments. That's the only major thing that's changed from when the bond was passed. It does involve a little bit of extra square feet, but based on the efficiencies of the programs and the design, the district is getting extra square feet at very minimal impact to the initial program. So they're getting more square feet for more efficient cost."

The greatest benefits of using these prototypes, according to Kiehl, has to do with space flexibility and their ability to expedite the schedules.

"These schools have designed within them the discovery zones, as well as the technology that goes with it all. So no matter where students and teachers are at within these buildings, they will have access to internet," Kiehl said. "Collaborative teaching, student to student, student to instructor and instructor to instructor, is more easily accomplished."

The design process, however, is not without some challenges.

"I think the biggest challenge our teams are facing is how to incorporate these small changes to the prototype, and in a manner that still allows us to bid it in the fall," Kiehl said. "It's the schedule that's more or less driving the challenge, as well as getting access to the different properties that the district is purchasing to build these schools on. There's a lot of different variables going on with the Pine Street site. The property has been tied up with some tax problems and things of that nature, so the district is trying to get all that cleared up."

However, once the district can get everything figured out with the Pine Street property, the hard work will pay off for the communty in the long run.

“Now that it’s getting all cleaned up, there’s a number of developers that will be able to move on with their residential planning, which will in turn support the school facilities in that area and benefit the district in the long run,”

Kiehl said. “So a lot of that’s playing into this bond initiative, and spurring other development as it goes forward.”

There are some other issues DLR Group and the district face during the design process.

“I think one of the biggest challenges... is delivering on all the promises that were made during the bond issue, such as ensuring that all these schools have safer areas for the students to go to in the case of storms,” Kiehl said. “So the team worked hard to incorporate those into the prototype designs. And then, delivering all those things on time and within budget. That’s always a challenge. But our design teams and engineers and construction managers have all been successful in doing that in the past. I remain really confident that we can do this for Liberal as well.”

The schedule they hope to follow will have the design process for the first three schools finished up by mid-August, which is when JE Dunn, the construction manager, wants to put the schools out to bid. If the design process can stay on schedule, then the schools will be bid by mid-September, and construction can begin in October, after the school board reviews the contracts.

“There’s still a lot of parts and pieces that we have to get arranged on the table and get pulled together, but so far everybody’s moving in that direction and all the different entities are working together to ensure that as much as we can, we were moving in the direction of that schedule,” Kiehl said. “For example, the city’s offered the flexibility to have special planning meetings called, so that if we don’t hit a scheduled meeting, we can have a special one to keep things on track as much as possible. There’s been great partnerships forged between everybody, just like during the bond campaign. Those same partnerships are continuing forward, which is exciting for everybody, because it’s going to take everybody to pull this off.

“The district’s done a great job in bringing all the different parties together so that we can share all this information with them and make decisions in a timely and efficient manner, so that we’re not making decisions when construction is going on. When that starts to happen, that’s when it starts to cost everybody money and time,” he added. “So I think the district should be commended on everything they’ve been able to do to date, while keeping up with the schedule. And since it’s the clients that have to make these budget decisions on things that they need, that usually takes more time. USD 480 has done a good job of making decisions in a timely manner.”