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By JESSICA CRAWFORD • Daily Leader

The Blue Ribbon Committee has been meeting since early August in order to discuss the most efficient and effective way to go about renovations throughout USD No. 480. There have been solutions voted on by the Board of Education and ultimately passed. The committee next asked for more time to gather more demographic information. Monday evening, their recommendation was made, and the board passed it 6-0 with Stacy Johnson absent. Nick Hatcher of Hatcher Farms has probably been the most vocal member of the Blue Ribbon Committee, put together by one of the board members.

Different individuals throughout the community were asked to participate in the particular committee. "I guess I was the one that spoke up the most at these meetings because I can," Hatcher said. "I guess I am in a position where my business is not affected by the opinions of myself and the people of Seward County." During a board meeting on Aug. 21, a particular plan brought to the board by the blue ribbon committee was passed. The resolution to correct the lack of space throughout the district was known as Opt. 2. After more discussion between the committee, they decided they needed more time to learn more about USD 480, particularly the demographics of the district. "As we learned more, talking with the school board, talking with the administration, doing our own research and talking with teachers," Hatcher said. "We found that there were other issues other than the overcrowding of the high school and basically it trickled down to the elementary level. We found that there were more significant deficiencies throughout the facility." With many renovations needed throughout USD 480, the Blue Ribbon Committee asked for more time and went back to work. "We decided not to make a rash decision," Hatcher said. "So we kept asking for more information and with the help of the administration and the DLR Group (architects)." Hatcher added that DLR Group had a lot of information about how much square footage each student should be allotted. DLR also informed the committee of the how much square footage is used up in a hallway and in a commons area. He added that DLR was extremely quick and helpful with the information they provided. "Liberal has grown," Hatcher said. "And now it's time to fix the problems."

Hatcher stated that the 26 year old high school, although built very well, is over crowded. "It's a great facility," he said. "It has been maintained beautifully and is a great facility to carry on."

According to Hatcher, the ninth grade needs to have an area to facilitate ninth grade students by themselves. The applied science needs additions made to the building and the alternative education building must be expanded. On an athletic note, the current track is not up to state levels for competitions to be held at Liberal High School. The recommendation has also been made to artificially turf the football field. "At first I was opposed to that, but after I sat down with the administration they helped educate me in the fact that if it was a turfed field we wouldn't use any water, and we could use it 12 hours a day," Hatcher said. "Right now they try to keep people off of it to preserve it for football season in the fall." "What good is a facility if you can't use it every day," he asked. "The band has to practice. If they can't get on the field because they have to save the field for football, where are they going to practice? It's a trickle down effect. That is certainly unique because both junior highs and the high school use it and that's a lot of traffic that can go onto that field if there is artificial turf." On the middle school level, according to Hatcher, the buildings are old and have been renovated. Hatcher said it still didn't solve the problem. With the small oddly shaped rooms, he said, many of the classrooms do not have windows. Hatcher stated that studies have shown that children learn more effectively with sunlight. On the elementary level, that is where Hatcher said the biggest problems lie. Overcrowding throughout the elementary buildings and the archaic buildings, according to the Blue Ribbon Committee, the current situation demands change. With the need of a Pre-K setting, the committee suggests that Washington Elementary would be the ideal place for such a facility. "Washington, in particular, they are out of room. Because of the size of the facility and we can't add on to it," Hatcher said. "It just seems logical that would be a good facility to house the Pre-K." Garfield is another elementary school that may no longer be properly serving its purpose, mainly due to age and overcrowding. The building is likely to be used for something other than an elementary school under the recommendation of the committee. "Demographics show that there is a decline of kids in that area," Hatcher said. "For an alternative educational facility, Garfield would fit the bill. That is something that the administration said we need to expand on and we just feel like Garfield is the perfect spot for that." Students currently enrolled in Washington and Garfield would be dispersed to other elementary schools. With the proposal of the Blue Ribbon Committee, the addition of classrooms and further renovations will make ample room for these students. With the possibility of losing state funding, either a percentage or altogether, Hatcher feels the odds of the bill being grandfathered in due to the timing of the bill is good. "From what our bond council has told us, bond projects are approved and voted on before legislature does anything with that program, thus being grandfathered in and still being eligible for those funds," Thatcher explained. With the nation currently in the middle of a recession, Hatcher was asked how difficult it will be for the community to vote for the bill just on the recession factor alone. "The way I looked at it, is we will be saving basically 30 to

36 cents on each dollar – we will get state aid," he said. "So the project is not going to cost you \$60 million. What it comes down to is roughly \$8 a month for the taxpayer." To put into perspective \$8 per month, that is approximately the cost of going out with co-workers once a month at a local restaurant. For smokers, \$8 is less than two packs of cigarettes. It's a lot of money, but it time for change," he added. "This should go to general election in April."

With the board approving the Blue Ribbon Committee's proposal, what's the next step? According to Hatcher, the next step is to inform the public of what exactly the proposal is, the cost and why these renovations are needed. "We have been making due with what we have had for a number of years," he said. "And it was time that we did something about it. There might be some modifications in the plan, we have a concept of what needs to happen. "It was our job to come up with a recommendation with listening to the experts and professionals," he added. "So through school board and administration we found that the recommendation that was made was the right recommendation. In April voters will be asked to vote on this issue which affects students now and many more to come. With a cost of \$60,442,000, educating one's self is quite possibly the best way to go about making the decision.

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