

By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader

The April 7 elections are just more than a month away, and members of a local committee are continuing to educate the community about a school bond that would bring improvements to most of Liberal's schools, as well as some of its facilities.

The Our Children, Our Economy, Our Future group hosted a forum Tuesday at the Rock Island Depot, and committee member and USD No.

480 Board of Education candidate Nick Hatcher said some of the upgrades from the \$61.2 million bond will come to Liberal's football field.

"The old track will probably have to come up, and when that happens, it's the perfect opportunity to go in and do something with the field and put down artificial turf," he said. "Liberal High School is the only high school in the WAC Conference that does not have artificial turf."

Hatcher said another selling point for artificial turf at Redskin Field is that the school district currently spends about \$44,000 maintaining the field with watering, fertilizing, mowing and painting lines.

He said when the track is widened, bleachers will also need to be taken out on the visitors' side of the field.

Hatcher then went into the problems in school buildings themselves starting with South Middle School.

"At South, there's instances where students have to go through a classroom in order to get to another classroom on the other side," he said. "It's not safe. It's not secure for those students."

Hatcher said West Middle School also has problems, mainly with irregular shaped classrooms, which he said are not conducive to good education.

Under the bond, four elementary schools – Lincoln, MacArthur, McKinley and Southlawn – would see the addition of more classrooms.

“Gyms will be added,” Hatcher said. “Special rooms, music, computer labs. We’ll be renovating the entry ways in the administrative areas in some of the schools.”

Another elementary, Washington, would become a pre-K center, which Hatcher said would make room for an additional 200 students.

Garfield Elementary would become an alternative education center providing space for an additional 200 students and expanding the program to include 7th and 8th grade students.

“Currently, it’s only available for high school students,” Hatcher said.

Liberal’s intermediate schools, Cottonwood and Sunflower, were built in the 1990s, and Hatcher said those schools have the capacity to accommodate any expected growth the district may see.

He said there will be a mill rate increase of 8.21 mills if the bond is passed.

Hatcher said part of the need for the upgrades is not only for the increase in students, but also the changes in the way education is provided.

“The days of lining students up in rows, chairs and desks and somebody like myself standing up here lecturing and preaching is gone,” he said. “They’re going to break those kids up into smaller groups. They’re going to make sure that this group is doing exactly what they’re supposed to be doing. If they don’t, those teachers will know how to help those students.”

The improvements will also provide gym space for physical education time, which eliminates conflicts with lunch at elementary schools, according to Hatcher.

“It is mandated that students in our elementary schools have 100 minutes per week of P.E. class,” he said. “Well guess what? Where they’re serving lunch and breakfast are in the gyms in those elementary schools.”

The upgrades will help maintain recommended student/teacher ratios for the best instructional opportunity as well.

“If we don’t do anything, those ratios will get out of line,” Hatcher said.

Part of the bond upgrades would also include the addition of a 9th grade center, which he said will decrease overcrowding at Liberal High School.

“By having a separate campus and a separate academy for the 9th grade students, it will help them further develop their social skills and transition into the high school,” Hatcher said.

He added that passing the bond prepares the district to be “shovel ready” for any stimulus money that becomes available.

“A bond has to be issued and passed and ready for construction to be bid out,” he said. “President Obama wants to spend money, not next year, but this year. If you do not have a project that’s ready to go, that’s ready to be bid, we are not going to be eligible for some of that stimulus money.”

Passing the bond now also allows USD 480 to take advantage of state aid, which currently pays 37 percent of the bond.

“That’s \$23 million of this bond issue,” Hatcher said. “The bond interest rates today are at least 1 percent cheaper than what they’ve been in the past. To this project, that’s \$9.5 million. You add the

\$9.5 million in interest savings plus \$23 million, that’s half the project paid.”

He added about 5 to 7 percent of construction costs are returned to the community, even if all contractors and subcontractors are hired from outside the community, and if local people and firms are hired, that percentage could increase.

Hatcher said the proposed upgrades will not close or tear down any educational facilities other than maybe some of the district’s portable classrooms.

He concluded by noting with renovations to the track at Redskin Field, Liberal could also play host to a Kansas High School Athletics Association sanctioned track meet.

“That means more people here to Liberal, more tourists, more visitors, etc.,” he said.