

Low local mill levy ‘embarrassing,’ □ Diepenbrock says

By RACHEL □ COLEMAN • Leader & Times A public hearing to amend the 2012-13 budget ended moments after it opened, due to lack of comment at last night’s USD No. 480 school board meeting. Later in the meeting, the board approved the amended budget with a 6-0 vote, with Tammy Sutherland Abbott absent. District finance director Jerry Clay said that while the amended budget reflected a \$1.76 million increase, it was not a matter of adding new money to the pot.

“This is more like taking money out of your left pocket and putting it in the right pocket,” he explained. The additional funds required transfer because the cost of food has increased, the number of students enrolled in the district has gone up, “and things just cost more now, compared to when we wrote the budget.”

Board member Steve Helm asked if the budget amendment would increase taxes.

“No,” Clay said. “The mill levy doesn’t change at all.”

Even so, the two-hour session ended with a focus on funding and discussion of the possibility of a mill levy increase, as Central Office administrators brought a strategic planning presentation to the board. No action was requested, but the presenters asked the board to think over the information — and the need to leverage more local funding sources — before the next meeting on April 22. “This is somewhat challenging, but we have to have this discussion,” explained Superintendent of Schools Lance Stout. He described strategic planning as “an arduous process,” which requires input from the board “so, collectively, we can begin to address the needs of the district.”

Directors brought a variety of statistics and facts to the board:

- USD 480 currently adds 100 students per year, with numbers expected to increase steadily in the coming years.

- Though teacher salaries have yet to be negotiated with the Liberal chapter of National Educators Association, it is likely costs will increase if good instructors are to be retained.
- Teacher-student ratios have crept higher than the district’s ideal threshold of 25 students per classroom, especially in grades 3, 4 and 5.
- With local preschool options dwindling, more kindergarten students arrive in the district without a basic foundation in learning. Currently, the waiting list for preschool programs tops 300 students in all.
- District facilities continue to lag in terms of long-term upkeep and improvement, said Director

of Auxiliary Services Robert Burkey: "When I took this job, I was handed a plan with [to-do] items more than five years old, but no funds," he said. "These are 'budget busters' that, if we tackle them, other things are affected. We need to set aside money for them, or we will start running into major problems."

Finance Director Jerry Clay told the board that funding these items and related issues might require an increase of the Local Option Budget. At this time, USD 480's LOB is the lowest of all 5A and 6A schools in the state, and overall ranks 282 out of 294 districts.

School board member Dan Diepenbrock responded to the presentation with the comment that the situation is "frankly pretty embarrassing. We are welfare recipients from the rest of the state," he said. "Our local dollar contributions to the district are smaller than 90 percent of everyone else."

Helm pointed out that "as far as I know, most people in Liberal pay income taxes." State money that funds the school district is, essentially, funds returning to the community, he said.

"Everyone else in the state pays income taxes, but we're getting more back than everyone else," Diepenbrock replied. "We need to step up and shoulder a larger share."

Recently re-elected board member Nick Hatcher added that more local funding is likely to be matched by other sources.

"We're still leaving money on the table," Hatcher said, "and that bothers me. I would take advantage of those situations, rather than walk away with money still on the table."

Based on administrative recommendations, a mill levy increase would result in modest property tax increases for homeowners, noted board member Delvin Kinser.

"I'm figuring it out and it's, what, \$13 a year for a \$100,000 home, for a one-mill increase," he said. "If we raised the mill to fund these recommendations, that would be \$61.85 a year."

"That's like one dinner for four at Applebee's, once a year," Diepenbrock said.

"Business owners and farmers will pay more," Clay added. "It's important to recognize that the rates are not the same for them as for homeowners."

Discussion of the issue will continue at the April 22 meeting, where, Stout said, "we'd like feedback about proceeding with our staffing issues. If given the green light, we can go out and get good teachers on board. The time to hire staff is now."