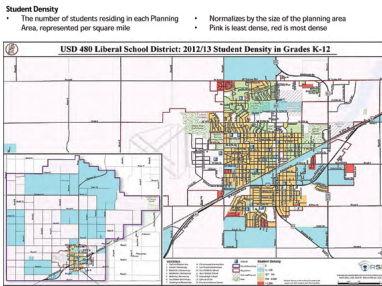


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Demographer gives school board data on what lies ahead

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times Local schools will be changing. In fact, they already are, primarily in terms of how many students crowd into each classroom. That means USD No. 480 could be “in a world of hurt a few years down the road,” said deputy superintendent Paul Larkin. A special school board meeting last week explored the details, with the board and directors hearing research from demographer Robert Schwartz with RSP & Associates, as well as representatives from two finance-option advisors.

USD 480 board members Delvin Kinser, Nick Hatcher, Dan Diepenbrock and Chris Diepenbrock attended the meeting; Steve Helm, Tammy Sutherland-Abbott and Cheryl Louderback did not. Diepenbrock and Louderback will end their terms this summer, to be replaced by newly-elected board members Crystal Clemens and Matt Friederich.

Larkin said the meeting, which included three 45-minute, detailed presentations, “felt positive,” though it was marked by a mood of caution. “Nobody wants to move ahead of the community,” Larkin said. “Nobody has a plan or an agenda. I was really proud of the board, because while they know the district had needs, there is a sense of avoiding preconceived ideas that do not reflect what the community wants. I see this meeting as the beginning of a process designed to get the conversation going.”

The presentation focussed on the continuing trend for change in the district. As happens already, USD 480 is likely to enroll between 10 and 80 new students each year, and while those numbers might sound modest, they add up quickly.

Liberal's school district enrollment is expected to reach nearly 5,000 students by 2017-2018. Current enrollment figures in the district show that this year's graduating senior class is the smallest in the entire district, while the third grade class of 449 is the largest. Next year's total seniors will number fewer than the incoming kindergartners.

While 1,017 students joined USD 480 last school year, 1,036 left. Enrollment tended to decrease from grade to grade each year, but that trend stopped at eighth grade; in middle- and high-school, enrollment increased each year.

"The capacity of the schools will need to be reevaluated to fully understand how (bad) the enrollment pressure will be at each school," the report said. Using data from Google maps, the U.S. Census Bureau, and district enrollment information, the 40-page report included detailed maps showing where children in Liberal live and where school growth is most likely to occur.

Though the prospect of crowded schools was sobering, Larkin said, "There wasn't any sticker shock. Over the years, the administration and the board have done a good job of looking at the numbers, so the report was more of an affirmation of what we already knew."

While the community contains several areas of vacant land that could be developed for school facilities, "the speed at which they develop is tied to the desire of the land owners choosing to make that happen," the report noted.

Assumptions that played into the research project included a belief that the economy will continue to recover, with unemployment rates at or below 8 percent, declining foreclosures and fuel prices around \$4 per gallon. The firm also assumed that private and parochial school enrollment would remain stable.

With three board members absent and so much information to absorb, the board opted to put off any action until next week's regular school board meeting.

"The big question is, 'Where do we go next?'" Larkin said. "In my heart, I know the district wants and needs to do what's best for the whole community."

To determine what that is, Larkin said, "We need to move forward with town hall-style meetings to gather input from the community. People out there know our issues, and they need to give us their input before anything can move ahead."

USD 480's next school board meeting is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Monday, at the Education Service Center. A complete copy of the 41-page RSP report is available to the public on the district's website, www.usd480.net.

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