

Board begins expansion process, looks for community input

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By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times The mile-wide tornado that splintered schools and homes in Moore, Okla. occurred several hours before and hundreds of miles away, but it cast a shadow over the USD 480 school board's regular meeting Monday night. Board members expressed concern through voices cracking with tears — and with votes to move forward in the process of exploring solutions to the district's overcrowding and reliance on portable classrooms. A motion to direct architectural firm DLR to begin the process of finding out what the community wants passed 6-1-0, with member Steve Helm voting no and Tammy Sutherland-Abbott absent. Seeing news coverage of the Moore tornado, which destroyed two elementary schools in the Oklahoma City suburb, "broke my heart," said USD 480 board member Nick Hatcher. "When they were showing pictures of the little kids at that school, it reaffirmed why I want to be a servant in my community. If we do one thing, and that is only that we replace those portable classrooms with brick-and-mortar school buildings, we will have done what we should. I don't know if I could take having a tragedy like that in our community."

Hatcher shared his feelings during the board comments session of the meeting, after the board had spent considerable time discussing the DLR process. Member Steve Helm felt the contract, established during an unsuccessful bond issue campaign in 2008, should be re-examined by board counsel Rick Yoxall.

"I'm not comfortable voting to engage DLR with a contract made by a previous board five years ago," Helm said. "If we're going to jump off and begin this process, I want to start off on the right foot."

In discussion, board members revisited the fact that DLR, hired years ago, stipulated in the contract that the architectural firm's community-consensus-building services be utilized up to three times in preparation for an actual expansion project. The idea, explained long-time board member and attorney Dan Diepenbrock, was that if Liberal residents rejected a bond issue,

DLR could return for another try, two times if necessary, in order to design a successful effort that would win community approval. In the case of failure, as happened in 2005, the company would bill for expenses only. Payment for the firm's time and expertise, made in the form of one half of one percent of the total bond issue, would occur only if the public approved the project and financing for it at the ballot box.

"Either we believe we don't need to do anything, and everything is fine ... or we think we need to do something to improve our district, and there is no benefit in waiting around," Diepenbrock said. He noted that the 2008 contract precludes the board hiring a different architectural firm to provide the services offered by DLR.

Helm replied that he agreed: "We do need to do this process," he said, "but we should do it right, and check with legal counsel first. I support the process, but not in the way we're going about it."

"We're not voting on the contract," said board member Cheryl Louderback. "We're voting to move forward. Tonight, I believe we need to take the next step."

In accordance with the vote, DLR will begin a 26-week process designed to get feedback from the community. The main goal is to build consensus about what people in Liberal want the school district to do, before any proposals or designs are created.

"Our hope is that we'll come out of the process with a vision, and that the community is giving credence to that," said DLR staffer Penny Ramsey. "When we get to that stage, it should be clear, 'This is what your community has told us.'"

Board chair Delvin Kinser said he was confident the process could do just that.

"We need to go about the business of finding out what our community wants," he said. "I've been impressed every time DLR comes to speak to us. They don't want to bring a plan the public doesn't want."

In other business, the board voted 6-0, with Sutherland-Abbott absent, to install new fire alarm systems in the district's portable classrooms, as required by state inspectors. Until now, explained auxiliary services director Robert Burkey, inspections have allowed fire detectors similar to those used in private homes, to serve as the safety mechanism for the classrooms. Now, however, alarms must be tied in to the permanent systems installed in adjacent buildings.

"I want to go on the record for saying I'm utterly opposed to spending anything more on these portable classrooms," Hatcher said. "I will vote for this because our children's safety is extremely important. But let's get rid of the portables and build brick-and-mortar schools. The portables are a travesty to our community."

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