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By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

Not popular, not perfect, but prudent.

That was how USD 480 board president Delvin Kinser described the proposed budget for school year 2013-14, which the board agreed to present to the public after a workshop at its meeting Tuesday night. Though the new budget does not dramatically increase the district's overall expenditures — it comes in with a less than 1 percent increase — it does require a mill levy increase of 3.084 mills.

“We have to be very careful about what we ask taxpayers to do,” said Kinser. “There are circumstances beyond our control here, with 80 to 90 new kids entering the district every year. We know it's coming. And if we're going to do our mission statement, excellence in education, we can't have 35 kids in a classroom.”

The mill levy increase “basically boiled down to finding \$700,000 to pay for measures the board voted on earlier this year,” said finance director Jerry Clay.



On April 8, the board approved a proposal by the central office administration to add nine new teaching positions and 15 non-contact positions, in order to reduce class size throughout the district and support key programs and services.

On July 8, the board approved a request by auxiliary services director Robert Burkey to raise the rate of pay for the district's bus drivers in response to what Burkey described as serious system overload — too many students riding too few buses operated by too few drivers. The district also raised the bar on distance requirements for bus services, which should cut back on the number of students who qualify for transportation.

Prompted by long-time board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott, the board discussed alternatives to raising the mill levy.

“Why can't we find \$700,000 somewhere else?” she asked. “Before I want to see our taxpayers have increases, I would rather us find \$700,000. I'm just saying, I'm looking at our long-term picture.”

Clay said it was difficult to find more places to trim the budget. He'd already cut \$30,000 in expenses from the Local Option Budget expenses, a tricky task given the fact that property assessments in the county have lost value. While homeowners have seen their property valuations increase slightly, he noted, “oil and gas properties have dropped, which means less money coming to the district.”

School administration scaled back across the board, said Clay, and even sacrificed a technology update project.

“We cut out a million dollars, before we brought this budget to you,” said superintendent of schools Paul Larkin. Given the belt-tightening that is required, “I wasn't going to bring that additional expenditure to you. It's tough enough as it is.”

Though he approves of the more conservative fiscal approach, board member Steve Helm expressed uneasiness about the choice to put off technology updates.

“We’re kicking that down the road,” he said.

If the board wants an even leaner budget, Clay said, he’d give it another try.

“Tell me where to cut another \$700,000,” he said. “I am not comfortable building a budget and not having enough money built in to cover utilities and electric — you tell me what the winter’s going to be like. I can cut it back, but if it comes short, this board has to be willing to go into the reserve to cover expenses. I want to know we will survive.”

The board could rework the budget with the assumption that an additional 75 students will enter the district before the Sept. 20 “count day.” That deadline determines the amount of state funding that will flow to the school. At \$3,838 per pupil, 75 new students would bring just over \$280,000 to the district.

Board members Kinser, Nick Hatcher and Crystal Clemens voiced uneasiness about basing a budget on money that hasn’t been guaranteed and may not arrive.

“I don’t feel comfortable counting on enrollment numbers,” Clemens said. “I don’t want to make the budget so low we’re hurting later on.”

Larkin agreed. “There’s a reason we write budgets based on the previous year’s enrollment,” he said.

In the end, the board agreed to take a leap of faith, counting on the fact that voters and taxpayers in the community have paid attention to the board’s decision-making process and challenges, which are not going away. The district faces a significant space crunch in the near future; many schools are already crowded.

“I don’t want to throw trash in front of a bond issue, but remember, we voted on these things,” said board member Matt Friederich. When the board talked about overloaded teachers and overcrowded buses, he said, it sought solutions with the knowledge that moving forward costs money.

“We asked, where are we going to get the money? LOB. So why do we want to rescind our vote now?” he said. “If you look at the facts, we as a board voted to add teachers, we voted to deal with the transportation problem. Whether it’s popular or not, and I’m not a big fan of raising the mill levy, we have to go forward.”

Kinser encouraged board members to place their faith in the public, which he said shares the district’s commitment to education.

“We have to have the courage to say, this isn’t something we want to do, but it’s something we have to do,” he said. “We have to do it if we want to pursue educational excellence, if we want our high school to be the seventh best in the state.

“We have been so good about trying to build up public trust, and what we have to hope is that we can ask the public to understand. It’s not going to be a popular decision, but it’s a prudent one.”

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