



If bond fails, how will USD 480 cope?

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Decisions loom, but with a target date of Jan. 20, 2014, to agree on a final version of the district's bond issue, the USD No. 480 Board of Education still has a lot to discuss. That was the bottom line at Thursday night's meeting.

Board members and administration said they hope to continue give-and-take with the community in the next weeks. A telephone survey set to kick off this weekend will bring more voices to the conversation, the board will meet again Jan. 6, a Vision Team meeting is set for Jan. 13, "we will mull things over, and then on Jan. 20, we hope to be able to call a vote," said superintendent of schools Paul Larkin.

During that interval, what the district asks from the community is a clear signal about what people would be willing to approve. At the same time, the district hopes to give voters a thorough understanding of what failure to pass the bond might mean for Liberal's schools and children.

Both topics featured prominently in the board's meeting Thursday. No action was taken on the bond issue itself, but discussion and information flowed freely.

"In looking at the time frame, one appropriate thing to do is to think about what we might do in the unfortunate event that the bond issue did not succeed," said Larkin. "To start with, we can review the items the people in the community have said are important."

Larkin listed, in order of importance, storm shelters for students, classroom expansion to eliminate the use of portable units, all-day kindergarten, improved security and safety and expanded preschool programs.

If the bond issue is unsuccessful, he said, "we have two options. We can maintain the status quo and just get by doing whatever we're doing, or is there any chance that we can afford to move forward? That's really the question we have to pose ourselves."

In the conversation that followed, Larkin and board members examined both approaches. In regard to kindergarten, for example, a status quo approach would mean half-day kindergarten only, regardless of state funding availability.

"There's just no room," Larkin said.

In the event that the district tried to move ahead and offer all-day kindergarten, asked board member Crystal Clemens, "how many more classrooms would we need?"

At least 11, answered Larkin, “and those would most likely be portable units.”

Board member Nick Hatcher, who arrived at the meeting at the 30-minute mark, grimaced.

“That’s the worst thing I could hear,” he said.

“We’re just talking about what would happen if we don’t pass a bond issue,” Larkin assured him.

In regard to storm shelters, the community’s top priority, the board asked what steps are currently taken to protect students during weather watches and warnings.

“What’s our plan?” asked board member Chris Jewell, “say, at Washington Elementary where they have all those portables, and there’s a tornado warning?”

The status quo, explained director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey, “is that we have to put ‘em in the safest spot we can.” Some students take shelter in a central room within the portable structure. Others are conducted to the permanent structure of Washington School, on the ground level. At South Middle School, Burkey said, “there’s a basement. But not all schools have those.”

If the district attempted to create storm shelters without access to bond issue funding, Larkin noted, “it would cost about \$1 million for each one.”

“Then how would you decide who gets it first?” asked board member Matt Friederich. Board members shook their heads at the thought of such a decision.

Other “status quo” details, based on current district operations: forced transfers for students would continue throughout the district at all levels except the high school; student-teacher ratios

would increase to numbers greater than the high mark of 30 students per class; portable units would have to be maintained and serviced.

“It sickens me in the summer to see the roofers out there working on the portable units,” said Larkin. “That’s throwing good money at bad problems, in my opinion.”

Projected strategies to move the district forward without bond money would still cost property owners, Larkin said:

“This is a dilemma we need to face. If this fails, we’re still going to have to do something, something that’s better than the status quo but not a lot better. It would take Local Option Budget (LOB) increases ... and I don’t want to use scare tactics. How are we going to get people to understand?”

With state funds to match 51 percent of any bond issue and a sales tax option to cut the local contribution nearly in half, “property owners are never going have a better time, financially, to do this,” said Clemens. “This is the best opportunity we can present to homeowners.”

As the meeting drew to a close, Friederich shared his personal experience with a bond issue that took place in Salina, in 1998.

“At the time, they pieced together a \$90 million bond, rather than taking care of everything the district needed,” he said. “More a decade later, the problems that hadn’t been addressed required a second bond issue that cost “almost double the original estimates. Building costs aren’t going down. Property isn’t cheaper.

“I lived in Salina at the time, and I voted on it. At the time, I thought it was the right vote, but the real-world experience shows that it cost the district more in the end. It’s food for thought,” Friederich said.

Board contemplates worst-case scenario

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