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Board passes bond proposal with 7-0 vote

By RACHEL COLE MAN

- Leader & Times

In a deliberate show of solidarity, the USD 480 board of education voted 7-0 Monday night to approve a resolution calling for a \$127 million bond election.

The action will allow voters to decide whether or not the district will move forward with construction projects designed to alleviate overcrowding in the district, eliminate portable classrooms and streamline the transitions students are required to make as they move from kindergarten to high school graduation.

A small crowd of about 30 people broke into spatters of applause as board president Delvin Kinser announced the final tally.

Despite the unanimous nature of the vote, board members expressed a range of emotions about the upcoming election.

First to speak was board member Steve Helm, who said his only reason for approving the resolution was to give the public a voice.

“I’m in favor of moving this forward to let people vote on it,” said Helm, adding, “I’m opposed to the plan as it is.”

Fellow board member Tammy Sutherland Abbott offered a similar opinion.

“I believe that, ultimately, this decision is for the voters and for that reason I will agree to let it go before them,” she said. “I fully agree that we need to get portables gone, that we need to work on our elementaries, that the high school needs some work ... but I think this is going to be an uphill battle. We have to get plans out. When the bond issue was only \$60 million, the community wouldn’t accept it. The problem we had last time, and I don’t really know if it went away, is that the community doesn’t trust the board. I don’t know if that has changed.

“In spite of my reservations, I will vote ‘yes’ just so the voters can have their say,” she said.

Crystal Clemens, one of two recently-elected board members felt “the opposite,” noting that the board and the Vision Team have taken great strides to inform the public about the plan.

“I challenge our community to stop being a passive community,” she said. “Be actively engaged. You’ve had the opportunity to find out what you need to know. We’re going to continue to get information out there. This is in your hands now. Be actively engaged and make an informed decision.”

Prior to the vote, three Vision Team members addressed the board to plead for “yes” votes — all seven of them.

Leader & Times publisher and Vision Team member Earl Watt said he had been converted from a skeptic to a supporter through the public meeting process. Initially, he said, he viewed the endeavor as a rubber-stamp farce.

“Were we just putting together a team that was going to want what the district wanted, or would we actually include the public? I wondered,” he said.

After seeing the many meetings in diverse settings and various times of day, as well as two phone surveys, Watt said he was reassured that the public truly had a hand in the process this time around.

“It was much more open,” he said. “The last phone survey really changed the direction of the plan, because the public is only going to support something to a certain level, and they made that known. It caused the plan to be scaled back.”

In the end, he said, “What’s been presented to you isn’t any one person’s plan, it’s what the public wants, and I don’t know if they’re going to say ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ but they should be allowed to have the opportunity to say.”

Vision Team member Roger Crossman followed up with a direct request for votes.

“One of the things we’d love to have is a unanimous decision,” said Crossman. “When we can get together and decide to move forward, that says something about our community.”

Vision Team member and veteran educator Ed Poley added that a unanimous vote would show

the board's willingness to consider the wishes of the public.

"It's not a perfect resolution — nothing is ever perfect — but this is the best thing we can do for a long time," he said.

Though she contributed a "yes" vote, Sutherland-Abbott objected to the Vision Team's approach.

"I resent the fact that community members and our DLR group tried to pressure me into a 7-0 vote. I voted for my community, not because I was told to vote 7-0," Sutherland-Abbott said. "I voted with my conscience."

Other board members voiced positive feelings.

"This process, I can say from personal experience, is far more than what we did five years ago," said board member Nick Hatcher. "It's truly amazing when the community does come together and put their minds to doing something great. I want to thank the public and the city for getting involved."

Matt Friederich, also a new board member, said he had arrived on the board with serious concerns about financial responsibility.

"The thing I want to stress is that there's no perfect plan, and I think the process that we've gone through has been good," he said. "The feedback I was getting, initially, was negative, and now it's changed. I think this is a step in the right direction."

Board president Delvin Kinser described the bond issue as "a tremendous opportunity to lay a foundation for educating our children for years to come. I really believe the community understands we are at a critical time."

In the end, Kinser said, the bond issue is a demonstration of good faith from both sides.

While it's true that "there are still some who don't trust the school board," Kinser said, "we made the decision that we were going to trust the public."

A second resolution will soon be presented to the board of education, outlining the details of a half-cent sales tax administered by the City of Liberal, as part of the project's financing. Voters will have their say about both questions — the bond issue itself, and the half-cent sales tax. Both must pass in order for the project to become reality.

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