

Next step is teaching voters what's at stake

By RACHEL COLEMAN

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Monday, the USD 480 school board approved a bond election.

Now, it's time to get busy with the teaching process — not the everyday business of teaching children in the district how to read, find countries on a map or solve algebraic equations — but the task of educating voters.

“What we have to do is get the information out there,” said Superintendent of Schools Paul Larkin. “They need the facts, the details about the plan, what the changes could mean for our kids and this community.” Those who work in the district must teach the public, helping voters understand what's at stake and what is possible.

However, Larkin said, the district's role in this process is one of education, not advocacy.



“We have to be very cautious with how we approach this,” he said. “I cannot go out and preach for people to vote ‘yes,’ because I am paid by tax dollars.”

The same is true for all district employees, during school time in particular. Schools cannot post signs urging parents to “Vote ‘Yes.’” Teachers and principals cannot urge patrons to support the bond issue — at least not during contractual (paid) hours.

Larkin said the district exists for all the students in the community, and the community at large. That includes taxpayers who are not in favor of a bond issue, “and the last thing we want is to get somebody angry at us, questioning the methods of how this bond election is presented,” he said.

To stay on top of the details, Larkin scheduled an administrative council for Monday (Jan. 27).

“All the principals and directors, everyone who’s got an area of responsibility, is going to attend,” he said. The architecture/engineering firm DLR, which is contracted with the district, will present an overview of the legalities and best practices for district employees. Administrators can then take the information to their buildings and help faculty and staff develop a clear sense of the “do’s and dont’s” for election season.

While it’s fine for Larkin and other USD 480 employees to explain the plan, share information and answer questions, “it has to be factual,” he said.

Advocacy will come from the same Vision Team members that worked to gather input from the community and form it into a viable plan to improve Liberal’s schools.

“The group that’s formed is already working,” Larkin said. “I believe they’re going to have a social media committee, a voter registration committee and several subgroups that will specifically go out and try to convince people to vote ‘yes.’ But it won’t be school folks who do that.”

In 2010, supporters of the \$17 million bond issue that resulted in expansion at Southwest Medical Center adopted a similar method. Their goal, according to press releases published in the Leader & Times, was “that every voter in Seward County has adequate information to make an informed decision on the project and bond financing.”

The start of making that goal a reality was a meeting of volunteers — Seward County residents, SWMC staff and consultants — to form a speakers bureau, an informational committee, a community relations committee to create awareness of the project and election, and a committee to identify and encourage voters to vote on Election Day or by advance ballot.

Chair and co-chair of the SWMC bond committee were Steve Cauble, and Sandra Koochel. The measure passed, with an 82 percent approval rate by voters.

As the school district heads into a similar situation, Larkin said he’s prepared for a busy three months.

“It’s going to a busy time, but fun, too,” he said. “All I can think about is the opportunity for our students and for our community.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — Upcoming articles will explore the next steps for the bond issue in terms of financing with the city’s sales-tax initiative, and the district’s process of looking at construction sites and cost estimates for new schools.