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Liberal City commissioners and USD NO. 480 school board members, along with staff leaders and students, join together for the signing of the interlocal agreement at McDermott Sunday that makes the half-cent sales tax official if approved by voters Tuesday. Those attending the signing are, back row from left, school board members Nick Hatcher and Matt Friederich, and middle row from left, City Manager Mark Hall, city commissioner Dean Aragon, city commissioner Joe Denoyer, city commissioner Janet Willimon, school board member Chris Jewell, school board member Crystal Clemens and Superintendent Paul Larkin, and front row from left, former McDermott student Ellie Hatcher, former McDermott student Torren Clemens, Mayor Dave Harrison, School Board President Delvin Kinser, former McDermott student Reagan Watt and former McDermott student Ren Watt. L&T photo/Earl Watt

BY EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

History was made Sunday afternoon at Liberal's oldest school when a joint meeting between the Liberal City Commission and the USD No. 480 School Board accepted an interlocal agreement, clearing the way for the use of a half-cent sales tax to fund school upgrades if voters approve Tuesday's school bond proposal.

The vote was 4-0 for the City of Liberal with support from Mayor Dave Harrison, Vice Mayor Janet Willimon, Dean Aragon and Joe Denoyer. Ron Warren was absent. The School Board approved the agreement 5-0 with support from Board President Delvin Kinser, Matt Friederich, Crystal Clemens, Chris Jewell and Nick Hatcher. Steve Helm attended the meeting over the phone, and after making a statement about the joint meeting being a publicity stunt, chose to abstain. Tammy Sutherland-Abbott was absent.

The rare agreement was only the third time in Kansas a school board and city have joined forces to use sales tax to help fund school upgrades, and Liberal was the largest community to do so.

The city approved the question to be presented to voters earlier, but the interlocal agreement is required before the tax could actually be collected.

"We had several meetings with our attorneys and also the Piper Jaffrey financing group that will be selling the bonds," Kinser said. "We spoke with Gilmore-Bell, a law firm in Topeka who handles these issues. We got together, had tip-of-the-iceberg meetings and set those folks to work to find the right kind of language. This is only the third time this has happened in the state.

We had to see how these things worked. It was back and forth, find what we were both comfortable with, the part of the infrastructure that the bond would take care of. We know the bond will be a win-win for everybody. It took a little longer than we originally expected, but we got it done and knew we would. Everyone had the same goal — what would work for everyone.” For the city to participate with the school district on the initiative made sense, according to Harrison.

“One of our goals as a commission is to build a better community,” he said. “We saw this as an opportunity to do just that. It took a lot of hard work to get it here today. I speak for the board and staff that it is a process that we are where we want to be, where we set out to be.”

The bond proposal calls for the construction of five new schools as well as some streets and other infrastructure improvements that will be needed. An independent economic impact firm determined that the \$127.8 million bond will have an economic impact of \$199 million on Liberal during construction.

“One of the things that caught me from the get go was the opportunity for a state match to fund half the project,” Harrison said. “That was huge. This is a huge project, it is economic development for our community like we’ve never had here before. People will say, ‘How do you view that because it is schools?’ We are ready to invest \$127 million here, spent here, it will improve our community, that’s the biggest thing for me.”

Growing the community has been ongoing from the school district by adding staff and teachers to service the growing student population. Improving the schools, and encouraging housing development, will benefit the district and the city according to Kinser.

“Our biggest deal is getting teachers to come here,” he said. “Housing is a need, and the city is involved with that. When we see this opportunity to build schools in areas made to bring in new housing, it all works together. Yes we have our own, but there are so many areas where our interests are their interests. It was good to get together. Both boards saw what we were doing would help the city, and what they did would help schools. No turf things, we had the same common goal — grow the community, make it successful, bring in new business, and provide the best education we can.”

Having the joint meeting on a Sunday afternoon at McDermott was no accident.

“Obviously this is our oldest school,” Kinser said. “I believe it is 87. I talked to folks whose grandparents went to school here. It has served well, and it is an example of how we have taken great care to get the very best out of our schools. When it was overcrowded we added on, and added on again, then portables. It was important to have a symbol of this as our past, and we have done a good job of taking care of the community’s property. It is their property. This is what we want to see, the kids that would have come to this building in three or four years will walk into a new building, we want them to know on this day we avoided this for you. It is an opportunity the community is giving you.”

Improving the schools was more than just an investment in educational facilities for Harrison. It was a part of a bigger issue.

“This is like the water park, the hospital bond issue — they are pieces of the puzzle to make a better community,” he said. “This investment is another piece. It is huge, and we all look forward to seeing it pass Tuesday.”

Kinser was also hopeful of a positive outcome, and the sales tax, state matching funds along with a plan that was created and proposed by members of the community has created the right proposal with the right funding options.

“This is like baseball when you hit the sweet spot and the ball goes over the center field fence,”

Kinser said. "We hit a sweet spot with this, and I believe Tuesday we will be circling the bases."

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