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By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

With a massive \$127 million bond project about to get under way after overwhelming support from local voters, USD No. 480 added a temporary position to oversee the entire project.

A project manager was approved during Monday's school board meeting, and the new person will ensure that the project advances without expensive change orders and unnecessary, and costly, delays.

While many district administrators will be involved with the project, they all have daily responsibilities that require their attention to advance the education process, starting with Superintendent Paul Larkin.

"My job is to move the district forward, focus on student achievement and educate kids," Larkin said. "If I oversee just the expansion project, what falls apart? Our No. 1 task is to educate students. That is my No. 1 goal. We had a recent goal to get a bond to do what the community wanted us to do. The only way to do that is to bring someone in."

While there are construction firms and architects involved with local administrators, they will also be looking out for their company's best interests. Having a trained, specialized person looking out for the district's best interests was necessary and also utilized during the recent construction of a new high school in Garden City and when Liberal added intermediate schools in the 1990s.

"I called several school districts, including Garden City, about what they did, and they recommended that," Larkin said. "Past board members when Cottonwood and Sunflower were built told me that Don Warren worked for the district and oversaw those projects. It is too large of a project not to have someone paid for by the district looking out for our interests."

Former USD No. 480 school board member and current sixth grade teacher in Plains, Reid Petty, posted on Facebook that the position was just another extension of government.

"The voters didn't vote for extra administrative positions," his post stated. "Big government keeps getting bigger at the expense of the taxpayers in Liberal."

But Larkin said the position is being paid for out of the bond funds, not the general fund, and the position is temporary.

"The plan is to have (the project manager) work with us during construction and one year after during the warranty period," Larkin said. After that, the position will no longer be needed.

The expertise required for a \$127 million project, which includes the construction of five new schools, was not typical among a school district staff. The person that will be hired to oversee the vast scope of the project has a history in construction projects this size, according to Larkin.

"Vanessa Jones has an architectural degree from KU, she has worked in the private industry and in schools," Larkin said. "She has 10 years of experience working in the Kansas City area, and she is scheduled to start after Labor Day."

Petty also suggested that more money needed to be spent in classrooms, but bond funds are not used for daily educational salary positions, only in the costs of construction. A project manager can help avoid unintended expenses during construction which will insure that the voters get what they approved.

“When you have somebody devoting their attention to the project, you save by preventing change orders and being proactive,” Larkin said. “The more you catch up front saves you on the back end. She will be able to have her attention focused on that, and who knows how much she can save the district.”

A visit and discussion with a similar project in Little Rock Ark., also helped those involved with the expansion project understand the need to keep the plan moving forward and coordinated.

The contractor on the same elementary school being built in Arkansas that will be built here discussed “value engineering” which had to take place late in the building phase which required reductions in the construction costs by removing or reducing the project due to unintended expenses that arose during construction.

“One of things stuck with me is when budget gets short, you start cutting,” Larkin said. “When you make changes in construction phase, to save a dollar, you have to cut \$3. None of that gets you a match. This position will help us prevent value engineering on the back end.”

Petty also stated that “The position is titled Bond Project Manager, and the position pays \$85,000 a year plus benefits. You can’t make this kind of stuff up. This is absolutely not needed.”

Currently, every district employee has daily responsibilities, including Auxiliary Services Director Mike Rogg. If they were to focus solely on the full time position of watching the bond, they would not be doing what they were hired to do, according to Larkin.

“No one on staff is trained or qualified to oversee a project like this,” Larkin said. “We don’t make these decisions lightly. We don’t spend to spend. As a group of directors we debated the position, it went through the construction committee. The board was informed a long time ago that we would do this. The position was posted. We did our due diligence to keep everyone informed. We were right out in front with every piece of it.”

And when the project is complete, there will be no need to have a project manager on staff.

“The position is only here because of the bond project,” Larkin said. “It will go away.”

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