

By Jan Rahn

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The board of education for Perkins County Schools spent the majority of the evening June 10 fielding questions and listening to comments from the public regarding one agenda item—making a final decision on the district’s facilities in Grant and Madrid.

The board had two options of what to do with the facilities. These options followed a year-long study on the district’s school buildings.

The outcome of the meeting is that the board will pursue getting bids on adding onto the Grant high school facility. Board President Shawn Turner made the motion with a second by Ryan Hendricks.

Prior to that action, board member Scott Osler made a motion to hold a special election during the May Primary in 2014 to give voters a voice in the district’s decision on the two options.

The board voted five to one against putting the issue to a public vote.

Here are the two options:

1) Madrid: Demolition of the three story section of the middle school (grades 6-7-8) building with new construction to recapture the space, plus upgrades to electrical and mechanical systems.

2) Grant: Construction at the high school to include seventh and eighth grade classrooms, cafeteria/kitchen area and second gymnasium, plus remodeling and upgrades. The sixth graders would attend school at the elementary building in Grant.

The board openly discussed the pros and cons of putting the issue to a public vote. Board president Shawn Turner said he is not opposed to a vote, but is against a vote without solid numbers on the cost of the two projects.

In April 2012, the district entered into a contract with BD Construction of Kearney who performed the facility study and released estimated costs of the two options during public meetings held in February of this year.

Razing and rebuilding at Madrid could cost approximately \$5.2 million.

Constructing the new areas at the high school site in Grant is approximated at \$6.4 million.

Turner said formal bids would provide something solid for the public to vote on and that it was time the board picked one or the other project to move forward on.

“I cannot support a vote until then,” said Turner. “We need bids and true cost. Once it’s designed and bid, that’s what it will cost and then there’s something to vote on.”

Turner said pursuing bids could cost as much as \$400,000 and only one design would be selected anyway.

The design and bidding process will take six to nine months, at which point the board wants to make sure the actual cost comes in near or at the estimated cost of the project.

If they are satisfied with those costs then more than likely formal action will be taken to close the middle school and construction will begin in Grant in the spring.

“Whatever decision was made, some members of our community were not going to be pleased,” said Superintendent Tobin Buchanan. “I hope that everyone will continue to support our board, staff and students as we move into the next phase for Perkins County Schools.”

Patron/Board Input on Seeking Public Vote

Prior to the 5-1 decision by the board to not hold a public election, those in attendance were given the option to express their opinion or ask questions. Below are some of the public

comments and questions from patrons that were answered by board members:

Patron: Get on with a board vote to pick an option. Voting is a waste of time and money.

Board member: It's an emotional issue and shouldn't be jammed down taxpayers' throats.

Patron: This was set in motion when the two schools (Wheatland/Grant) consolidated; the state shoved it down our throats then.

Board member: I'm afraid we'll make a move that won't heal (if the board makes a decision without giving the district patrons a say in it).

Patron: Let someone start a charter school—give them their school back.

Board member: We need to look at what's most efficient; we don't have to do something this nice, but we're fortunate enough to be able to do something nice.

Board member: We were elected to handle day-to-day and all issues of the district. We were voted in for a reason. People can express their opinion but we need to decide what/when to vote on something vs when to pass it on for public vote.

Patron: The initial nine-member board when the school consolidated couldn't close the Madrid site for six years. That is no longer true. The board has the authority to spend the money. If the district can pay for it, there's no reason for a vote. There has been more than enough time and enough meetings—make a decision and move on. You can't change things; there are still people mad over the Elsie/Madrid consolidation. Do what's best for the district and the kids.

Board member: I thought we were comfortable with the numbers. The people we would be getting bids from aren't new; the numbers are solid. If we postpone the decision to go to a vote, costs will increase and people won't be any happier.

Board member: If we decide to go to a public vote and if the outcome is divided equally then we're not any further ahead with a divided district. People have been invited to the meetings and only a total of 130-140 have shown up to get information versus 2,000 who voted in November. There are lots of points that are valid, but the real question is whether the option chosen is better for our kids. The issue is not over our kids.

Patron: It was said early on in the public meetings that keeping the middle school separate from the high school was a good thing.

Board member: It has its benefits and it has disadvantages, such as ability to offer more areas of education.

What Will Happen to the Middle School Site?

Once it was unanimously decided by the board (6-0) to pursue solid figures for construction at the Grant site, patrons and board members continued with comments and questions:

Patron: What will be done with the Madrid school building—will it just become an eyesore?

Board member: It should be maintained in an orderly fashion (grass mowed, etc.)

Board member: I have the utmost confidence that we'll take care of that facility.

Board member: We need to take care of it in case someone wants to purchase it.

Patron: Will it be taken care of four or five years and then you'll move on and just let it go?

Patron: I have a problem with you saying you'll take care of it. Right now there's a refrigerator outside and nothing has been done about it for two-three months. How can we depend on you keeping it up?

Board member: It's my opinion that if we close the facility we'll do what it takes and work with the community if a new business wants to come in, but we won't just let it run down.

Board member: I don't want an eyesore. We'll maintain it just like any building and be responsible for the dollars it takes.

Patron: I find it hard to believe you'll make major capital improvements at the middle school like

you did with the elevator at the high school.

Board member: The elevator project at the high school was already underway before the schools merged.

Patron: The middle school building has not been kept up.

Board member: We have to figure out when we've thrown enough money at it. The old part has come to the end of its life.

Board member: In looking at declining numbers of kids, it would eventually be closed. There are a lot of kids optioning out, such as to Wallace.

Patron: If there aren't enough kids then why build (in Grant)?

Administration: We could actually bring in all of the district's kids and infuse them into the high school building, which would be the most economical way to do it. We responded to the positive features of separating kids.

Board member: We're able to offer above-average options to our students. The point being—we are not in a financial crunch; it's my goal not to run it at the absolute cheapest method.

Patron: Auction off the Madrid site. Any money put into it is putting money into a black hole. That's business. Auction it, and if it's valuable to someone, then get it into their hands as soon as possible.