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Top News

Board says 'Yes' to referendum

Voters to decide on building upgrades, easing debt pain

By Ben Schultz

On Sept. 9 residents within the school district of Colby will be faced with two questions regarding its future.

The Colby school board officially authorized a referendum with a pair of proposals calling for a total of \$3.9 million. The first question will ask for \$2,550,000 for facilities upgrades and the second for \$1,400,000 to cover debt for prior service unfunded liability.

The bulk of the \$2,550,000 for facilities will be about \$841,000 designated for heating, ventilation and air conditioning projects. Other major costs include roof repairs and upgrades in a science room.

The board looked at ways to trim the final price tag for facilities, including decreasing the \$50,000 set aside for security or that same cost for the retaining wall under the bleachers by the football field.

The board decided not to include money for resurfacing the high school track. It would cost approximately \$35,000 and the board said it can put it off.

"The track is in excellent condition," Engel said.

Lavinia Bonacker requested the board include some money to upgrade the sound system in the high school theater. She sees a referendum as the best hope to get it fixed.

"I'm afraid if it isn't in the referendum it probably won't get done," she said.

The sound system is 42 years old and was designed for speaking, not singing. Its microphones cut out during performances and occasionally produce feedback. The theater is used by many groups and could serve as a room for an audio/video class.

The board agreed the theater could be allotted \$10,000 for improvements. Bonacker had presented two proposals, one of which the board felt was too expensive to include.

"I don't think this area can afford to be elaborate," Engel said.

The second question concerning paying off prior service unfunded liability would use about \$1.3 million in bonds to take care of the district's debt. Colby, like many municipalities and school districts, still owes money from the merger of the retirement systems for all public-sector employees in the early 1980s. The board can improve the district's interest rate and avoid a yearly penalty if the referendum is approved. Right now the interest rate and penalty is more than nine percent, and the district can't pay it down.

The referendums' potential impact on tax rates cannot be determined at this time. On July 16 at 8 p.m. the school board will meet with financial consultants to hear options for bonds. Figures should be available after that. On July 21 at 8 p.m. it will have a public information meeting.

The board invites the public to attend the meetings. Members said they are confident the savings will be obvious.

"I really believe if the facts are presented to the public, it will sell itself," board member Larry Oehmichen said.

MSA proposal rejected

• The board rejected a bid by engineering firm MSA for work on the elementary school driveway. The board noticed MSA's estimates were using square yards instead of square feet in estimating costs.

"These numbers are not correct," Engel said. "This just blows my mind how you guys let this out of your office."

The board agreed MSA's price tag of about \$281,000 seemed extremely high for repaving the parking lot. Engel said it should come in around \$60,000 to \$70,000.

The district planned to have a turnaround area with 60-degree angled parking spaces. The plan also called for six light poles and 371 feet of curb and gutter. However, now the district is wary of using MSA's services given the magnitude of the firm's mistake.

"Our confidence is a little shot," superintendent J.T. Downen said.

Time was drawing short for the district because the bidding and construction process would have likely pushed the project toward the end of summer vacation, possibly into the school year.

The board voted to table the issue until November.

Other business

- The board accepted the resignation of Rick Golz as high school boys basketball coach.
- The board hired Susan Will as a kindergarten teacher.
- The board voted 6-1 to seek a legal opinion about a qualified economic offer and interest arbitration for settling the 2007-09 contract with the Colby Education Association.

