Dunlap school board approves athletic facilities upgrades

Athletic field upgrades, stakeholders’ meetings and satisfaction surveys were the discussion points of the Dunlap School District 323 school board meeting Dec. 8.

The board briefly touched on the 2011 tax levy that raises taxes from 4.07 to 4.17 percent. Essentially, that will cost the average homeowner $33 for every $100,000 their home is worth.

There was not much discussion or any questions raised from the public on this issue, possibly because the community approved the measure when passing the new school referendum in early November.

Prior to the regular school board meeting, a facilities committee meeting addressed the district’s plan to upgrade the high school’s athletic facilities. It was a major point of contention among the many members of the public in attendance.

“We’ve had a process for the last eight months where we’ve involved parents, coaches, teachers, community members, athletic boosters — basically, our philosophy is to involve stakeholders in the decision making,” said superintendent Dr. Jay Marino.

“We had four separate meetings with all of those groups of people to provide input in the high school athletic facility renovation plan. So the plan we presented (Dec. 8) was a result of those sessions.”

The plan calls for $5 million worth of renovations to the football field, soccer field, tennis courts, baseball and softball fields, increased parking and a new ring road to circle the school.

Some of the renovations include putting synthetic turf on the football field, fixing drainage issues on the baseball and softball fields and a new soccer venue by Dunlap Valley Middle School.

One sport that is left out of this round of renovations is the swim team, and many people spoke on its behalf.

“As a parent and a swim mom, the facilities we have now are degrading significantly, because frankly, they’re 35 years old,” said Dee Walker, a Dunlap  
resident, in her plea to the board.

Walker said she has two sons involved in the swimming programs — both winter and summer — at the high school.

“The places we’ve traveled to have much more stable facilities and they’re safer because there is more room (around the pool). Moving this back to phase three is something we shouldn’t lose sight of.”

Marino said he understands people’s frustrations with moving the idea of a new swim facility back, but it makes the most financial sense.

“The swimming pool project is about a $5 million project and all of the other projects totaled $5.3 million,” Marino said. “We’re just not in a financial  
situation to do everything we proposed and throw in another $5 million.”

Marino said the school district has the money set aside to do one or the other, and the board is faced with the tough task of deciding which is most important at the moment.

“When we have a finite number of dollars to spend you have to make those decisions, and that’s the tough thing about leadership — you look at everything and make the best decision you can with the rationale you have,” Marino said. “You know some people won’t be happy with it, but we’re  
making the best decisions we can.”

Marino did say that the swimming complex is already in the design phase and will be more than adequate with competition-sized pools and plenty of room for multiple teams. He said it would be something the community can take advantage of as well.

“We would love to do it now, so instead we’ve put it on the master plan for consideration in the near future and that’s where we left it,” Marino said.

The board approved the contract with Farnsworth Group who will head up the athletic facilities upgrades. Marino said the school board hopes to have new tennis courts, a new ring road and the new synthetic football field in place before the 2011 school year begins.

The soccer team will use the football field next year as they wait for the grass seed to sprout at their new field down by Dunlap Valley Middle School.

The board also discussed sending out satisfaction surveys to all students, parents and teachers in mid-April.

Students and teachers will take the surveys online at school, while parents will receive them in the mail with a self-addressed, stamped return envelope.

“An organization that embraces continuous improvement as our school district, has to ask the question, ‘How satisfied are you with our school district?’” Marino said.

Questions will touch on what the school district is doing well and what some things are that the school district could do better.

The results will come back to the school district some time in the summer, allowing educators to get together, look at the report-card style grades and  
possibly implement new goals.

“It’s a continuous improvement tool and a way to measure perception — meeting the needs of parents,” Marino said. “The idea is that over time you increase satisfaction.”

Surveys are typically handed out every other year.

In other items, the board:

• approved the purchase of four 83-passenger buses, one 54-passenger bus with wheelchair accessibility and one 21-passenger bus

• approved the hiring of three special education counselors/social workers for the whole district. Previously, the district was hiring life skills aides through the Special Education Association of Peoria County, but with the district growth, Marino said it makes more sense for the district to have its own.

“We’ve used a lot of the service in the past, but as we grow and we have a greater need, it becomes more efficient to hire them ourselves,” Marino said.

• listened to a presentation about teachers implementing a program called curriculum mapping. The presentation was run by the district’s curriculum director, Dr. Lonna Anderson.

“How can we ensure that our kids are getting the same content and skills?” said Anderson. “Although (teachers) may have the same textbook, I may do things differently than you do sitting across the town (at another school in the district).”

The software allows teachers to really break down the content they’re teaching and look at it across grade levels to see where time can be saved and fill in any gaps.

• and discussed making a minor change to the school day’s schedule to allow teachers to come together once a week and look at ways to improve their methods of teaching.

“(They) are basically looking at student data, analyzing test results and collaboratively seeing what we can be doing to help those students achieve at an even higher level,” Marino said.

The board is trying to find a time where students do not lose instruction time and nor do they make the teachers stay late once a week. One generic example Marino gave was students would start school 15 minutes early, four days of the week, and get out an hour early, one day a week.

“Essentially you haven’t changed instructional time — didn’t add or take away,” Marino said. “We’ve created an hour where teachers can come together once a week.”