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Sandy Creek welcomes Clay Center overture

School Board Could Vote On Monday

Fairfield – Everyone who spoke at the Sandy Creek Board of Education work session Wednesday about a potential merger with Clay Center Public School expressed sentiments of excitement and appreciation.

At a March 2 meeting, the Clay Center Board of Education voted 6-0 to initiate a merger with Sandy Creek. On Wednesday, Sherry Kluver, Sandy Creek board president, began the discussion with a statement saying her fellow board members are excited about Clay Center's decision.

"We see this as a great opportunity to provide the best possible educational setting for the students at Sandy Creek and Clay Center," she said. "This possible merger would solidify the major components to operate schools, which are enrollment and finance."

The Sandy Creek board needs to respond to the Clay Center board expressing appreciation over the March 2 vote and that Sandy Creek will engage in discussion and take action to fully investigate and support the merger.

Sandy Creek hopes to have a merger agreement finalized for the state reorganization board by December 2009 or January 2010.

Other board members spoke about different aspects of the school that would be affected by a merger.

Mike Schlick spoke about enrollment and activities.

Enrollment in Sandy Creek has declined from about 650 when the district was created about 40 years ago to 378 this year.

Schlick said the school used to have three sections of every class. It now has two sections and sometimes only one.

"Our chemistry class this year – there's four students in chemistry class," he said. "It's great for having individual help, but in no way are our kids

being academically challenged by upper-level classes.”

If the schools merged, Sandy Creek would see an infusion of 186 students from Clay Center.

He said the Lawrence-Nelson Board of Education, Sandy Creek’s partner in the unified district, also has been facing declining enrollment.

“We’re all in this together, and we have to do something or else we’re just going to continue to decline,” Schlick said.

Board member Randy Harms spoke about how merging with Clay Center would affect the district’s land valuation total.

“By merging with Clay Center, we would see an increase of \$105,871,523 in valuation plus an increase in state aid. State and federal program reimbursements, impact aid and other revenue sources,” Harms said.

Including Nuckolls and Adams counties, Sandy Creek’s current valuation total is \$264.7 million.

Board member Stasia Paus spoke about the possible benefit of incorporating equipment from Clay Center should the schools merge.

Using numbers based on discussions with Clay Center representatives, she said Clay Center has 15 SMART Boards to three at Sandy Creek. Clay Center also has books and desks and more than 100 computers three years old or newer, plus a transportation fleet that includes three buses, three large vans and one small vehicle.

About a dozen people in a crowd of more than 50 took turns stepping up to a microphone and asking the board questions, or making statements, about the merger process.

Many of the statements were similar to what the first speaker, Clay Center resident Steven Shackelford, said. He began by thanking the board for their openness as they begin the merger process.

Shackelford then spoke about changing the Sandy Creek name, colors and mascot if the schools merge.

“Frankly, I don’t see any benefit to the students and the people of Clay Center for there to be any change in the name of the school, the name of the mascot, the color of the school,” he said.

“I know there are other people here from Clay Center who share that same opinion.”

Any money used on the conversion, Shackelford said, would be taken directly from the students’ education.

“I have to buy a new sweatshirt one way or the other,” he said. “I fully recognize I’ve got to buy apparel. Why should the other parents who have a vested interest in this school be forced to? I just don’t see any benefit in it.”

Sue Powell, also of Clay Center, said she understands the argument for

retaining the Sandy Creek name and look, but said that might not be the best option since Clay Center students would come into Sandy Creek with their own school identity.

“How would those kids feel? They have a school identity, they have a school mascot,” she said. “I’m not speaking for all of the school, I’m not speaking for all of the town, but I think we do have to consider the kids who are coming in.”

Sandy Creek board members said they will take the comments and questions they received Wednesday, including those about an elementary site in Clay Center or how a merger would affect representation on the South Central Unified District No. 5 Board of Education, into consideration once they begin the merger process.

The next step in that process will take place 7 p.m. Monday at the Lawrence-Nelson High School in Nelson. The Sandy Creek Board of Education meeting begins an evening of meetings that also will include Board of Education meetings for Lawrence-Nelson as well as a unified district board meeting.

As Kluver said at the beginning of the meeting Wednesday, the Sandy Creek board will respond to the Clay Center merger vote.

“The Board of Education at Sandy Creek Public Schools expresses its appreciation to the Clay Center Board of Education for its unanimous vote to pursue a merger with Sandy Creek Public School,” she said.