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Reporter: Tony Herman

## **Clay Center sets sights on Sandy Creek**

School Board Comes To Decision After Year of Merger Talk

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Clay Center – They described different aspects of the decision as enjoyable and gut wrenching, but members of the Clay Center Board of Education voted Monday 6-0 to initiate a merger with Sandy Creek Public Schools.

Board members, along with Superintendent Lee Sayer and Principal Jim Bovee, sat in front of a gymnasium packed with patrons from Clay Center, as well as Harvard and Sandy Creek, and answered questions for 30 minutes before approving the merger resolution.

Representatives from Clay Center had met with officials from both Harvard and Sandy Creek, as well as Sutton. The Clay Center Board of Education conducted a couple of public meetings with patrons there, too.

Based on those meetings, Sayer gave answers to questions that would have applied to either Sandy Creek or Harvard.

Questions ranged from how teachers would be selected - there would be options available for those who don't want to continue teaching, and everyone else would be placed in the same employment pool; to how much time before this decision would become final - probably in January or February 2010, once a petition establishing the merger was signed; to busing - the district would transport students back to their communities.

Sayer confirmed that once the merger was complete the Clay Center site would be used for elementary grades.

Now, members of the Sandy Creek school board will come up with a decision of their own about the potential merger. Donita Furman, president of the Clay Center school board, said after the meeting that she didn't know an exact date, but that Sandy Creek would decide soon.

The first academic year for the merged district would begin in the fall of 2010. The Sandy Creek and Lawrence-Nelson districts operate their schools jointly as partners in South Central Nebraska Unified School District No. 5.

One concern Sayer said he's heard from patrons of the other districts is that they didn't have much information about the potential merger.

"It's really hard to plan a wedding when you don't have a proposal," he said. "Those districts are sitting there and they haven't been asked yet. If you're from those districts and say, 'Why haven't we been informed?,' it's because Clay Center has not officially started the process with those schools."

In an interview this morning, Bovee said that by the time board members made their decision, Sutton wasn't a contender. That was because there had been fewer meetings with representatives from that district than from the other two.

"Sutton was a consideration right up to where the board made a decision," he said. "They were not as involved in as many meetings and the process as the other schools had been. I think a lot of people thought they were out of the consideration because of that."

Once a motion was made and seconded in support of the resolution, each of the board members explained his or her decision before voting.

Jeremy Anderson said two aspects of looking into the merger have been nice.

"One, all the positive comments that have come from all of you; I really appreciate that, I know we all do. Hopefully they'll continue," he said. "I also want to say that I discovered - and I think we all talked about this - we don't have a bad choice here, folks. There are really good neighbors all around us. You go to each of these schools, and they're putting education first."

Kim Story said she enjoyed the meetings with both Harvard and Sandy Creek.

"There's been good conversation, lots of opportunities from both directions," she said. "They've given us a lot of time, opened up their facilities to us to let us tour."

Clay Center is lucky to have neighbors on both sides that care for their kids as much as it does, she said.

"We just hope as we finish here tonight that the community will continue to stand behind this school and this decision," she said.

Dave Powell said going through merger discussions, which have been ongoing for about a year, has been "gut wrenching."

“I was dragging my feet; I didn’t want to go through this process,” he said. “It was almost like watching a death.”

Throughout the process, though, Powell said, there was no frustration, and everyone involved worked together and understood one another’s positions.

Bryan Woodbury said he established 30 criteria broken into six categories on which he based his decision.

“I talked to a lot of professionals, a lot of educators, administrators, a lot of people in the community to come to as unbiased of an opinion as I possibly could,” he said.

His highest priorities were educational opportunities, safety and tax levy stability.

“It is my opinion that Clay Center will be less fractured and split with a Sandy Creek - Clay Center merger based on the reasons I have discussed,” he said.

Still, Woodbury said he enjoyed his interaction with Harvard, calling that community “open and friendly.”

Dave Walker said he thought there were two goals Clay Center needed to meet with a merger. First, the deal must provide sufficient student enrollment to keep the merged district open. Second, the merged district must have resources to maintain high academic standards.

“I’m comfortable that whichever way we went we’d have that compatibility,” he said. “That’s what’s made that decision really difficult for us.”

Furman thanked patrons for supporting school board members throughout this discovery period.

“Hopefully you will be behind this decision and we will be strong as a community,” she said.