

School board considering possible variance board hearing on light poles

By Jan Schultz

The Imperial Republican

School board members took a major turn regarding the high school's one-to-one laptop program, purchasing Macs instead of a PC mini for use this fall.

It meant a nearly \$120,000 higher price tag to go with the Macs, and last week's unanimous vote didn't come without a lot of discussion and concern from some of the board members.

Later in last Thursday's special meeting, the board also had another lengthy discussion on the football field light poles.

In the end, the board deadlocked 4-4 on a straw vote taken on whether to construct the northeast pole at 40 feet or seek a variance for a 52-foot pole.

Laptop program will use Macs

On an 8-0 vote, the board voted to approve the proposal from Apple for purchase of 197 13-inch Macbook laptops for high school students and staff.

The package total amounts to \$258,165. It will be paid over a three-year period.

The 170 laptops for students cost \$989.10 each, while the 25 teacher machines and two more for the technology staff and administration run \$1,015.20 apiece.

Included in the package price is a three-year AppleCare warranty on all machines, a server, network connections and three days of on-site staff training, the latter costing \$11,700.

The lowest bid of four on supplying PCs for the program came from Computers, Etc. The individual price for the HP mini in that bid was \$521.

By switching to Macs versus a PC (this year the specs specified HP minis or Macs), it means additional laptops are being purchased for the teachers.

Earlier, the board had discussed not having to replace the teacher machines if they stayed with PCs. The one-to-one laptop program the past three years used Dell laptops.

The use of the laptop program, or lack thereof, by the teaching staff brought out much of the discussion at the meeting.

Several board members expressed concern about the lack of use by some teaching staff in their classes.

Gregg Smith said he could support the purchase of the more expensive Macs if there was better teacher utilization, the school made more of an effort to get textbooks online and a better school website was developed.

He noted the one-to-one laptop program is more expensive than what the school was spending on technology before the program started three years ago.

Smith said about \$60,000 was spent per year before the laptop program.

Several board members wondered if the additional features of the Mac would be utilized by the students. Board President Sheila Stromberger asked how many teachers ask for help in utilizing podcasts, digital media and other features.

Jerel Fortkamp, the on-site tech support person at the school, said he had four to five teachers ask him some questions about video capabilities in the past.

Board member Dirk Haarberg supported the switch to Macs, saying he didn't feel the PC minis

would do the students any service.

Supt. Matt Fisher admitted the school's biggest failing with the laptop program is teacher training.

There is no directive to the teachers on how the laptop program is used or to what extent.

Light poles

The school will start the paperwork for applying for building permits and a possible variance board hearing on the ongoing football field light pole issue.

Supt. Fisher told board members the airport zoning board has recommended issuance of building permits for the southwest, southeast and northwest poles, but not for the one on the northeast.

The school's latest application put the northeast pole height at 52 feet. After it went through the FAA and state reviews, the zoning board did not recommend a building permit for that pole.

"So, where we are at is to file for a variance hearing," on the northeast pole, or resubmit an application for that pole to comply with the zoning, Fisher said.

That would lower the lights from 52 to 40 feet.

Fisher told board members the school's attorney says they have a good case for a variance.

Building Inspector Nick Schultz said he will not schedule a variance hearing until building permits are issued or not. In this situation, a hearing wouldn't be scheduled until a permit is denied.

Schultz indicated he would probably not go against recommendations of the airport zoning board.

As of Tuesday, the school had not applied for building permits for any of the poles, according to Schultz.

Board President Stromberger said although her personal feeling was the school was being held to a higher standard than other entities, "I think it's time to move on.

"I'm ready to file at 40 feet and be done," she said.

Board member Charley Colton said there have been accommodations made at the airport for other businesses in the area, citing T-Junction and Markee's new ag shop building.

He said he supported seeking a variance, saying once the lights are up, "everyone will settle."

Several on the board expressed concern about the lighting inequality with poles at different heights. Results of the straw vote asked for by Stromberger:

To make application for the accepted, lower height (40 feet)—Penny Strand, Dirk Haarberg, Gregg Smith, Sheila Stromberger.

To seek a variance (and keep poles at 52 feet)—Charley Colton, Tom Gaschler, Karl Meeske, Bob Milner. Todd Burpo was absent.

On July 14, the board will take a vote on whether to continue with a variance hearing process.