

## **Willmar takes another step toward Middle School addition**

The next step in talks to build an addition to Willmar Middle School is advertising for proposals from construction management firms. The school district and the Southwest/West Central Service Cooperative have been in talks to work together to add on a gym and a special education facility for several months.

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Complete article from the West Central Tribune

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**WILLMAR** — The Willmar School Board has taken another step toward a potential addition at Willmar Middle School.

School district officials have been meeting with Southwest West Central Service Cooperative since summer about working together to build an addition at the school. It would include an alternative learning center and a new gymnasium for the middle school and a facility for special education students with high needs to be operated by the cooperative.

The School Board voted this week to seek proposals from construction management firms who could oversee construction if it goes forward.

Superintendent Jeff Holm said the vote was not a motion to hire a firm. If the project moves ahead, that would come later.

“I still feel like we’re on a path to have that partnership pay off and come to fruition,” he told the board.

The school district could pay for the gym and ALC addition with its undesignated general fund balance. The cooperative would pay for the attached special education facility.

The district’s general fund balance has been growing in recent years, and financial advisers have suggested the board consider spending that money on one-time purchases and not on recurring expenses.

The addition could provide adequate physical education facilities and an age-appropriate ALC program at the school for grades 6-8. The existing gymnasium is not large enough to accommodate a regulation basketball court.

The cooperative would operate a facility for children who need Federal Level 4 services, meaning they attend a separate program for all or most of their school day.

The cooperative is developing Level 4 facilities across its 18-county service area with more than 50 school districts.

Level 4 programs have been unevenly distributed across the area in the past, and the new effort will improve the distribution, allowing most students to travel 30 minutes or less to school. Currently, some kids ride a bus an hour each way to and from school.

The board also accepted more than \$80,000 in gifts and donations made up of all amounts at the meeting.

The gifts ranged in size from \$20 for a library book to \$45,449 grand piano from the Willmar Public Schools Foundation for the music department at the Senior High.

The 100-Yard Club donated \$14,763 for a coaching stipend, as well as \$4,000 for uniforms and \$411.94 for field paint.

Other boosters also donated. Basketball Boosters donated \$702 for boys' practice jerseys, and Cardinal Pride gave \$3,228 for weight room equipment and \$1,941 for boys' hockey uniforms. The Blue Line Club donated \$1,941 for uniforms.

The list included seven donations for the FIRST Robotics program, a total of \$5,750.

Other donations included \$500 for the High Mileage program, \$700 for GED Ready vouchers, \$520 for ECFE Parenting Partners, \$538 for the Cardinal Care Fund for student lunches, \$500 for Early Childhood Networking Group and \$350 for the KCEO badge project.

The district's current enrollment is 4,358 students. Enrollment has been up at all three elementary schools and at the Senior High. The largest increase has been 34 students at Kennedy Elementary; the rest are in single digits. The Middle School enrollment has dropped 55 students.

Business and Finance Director Pam Harrington said enrollment has consistently been a little less than the last school year.