

R-3 ready for a fight

A piece of proposed legislation named House Bill 1836 has the full attention of the Platte County R-3 Board of Education. In essence, the bill would result in taxes being abated on future development on Kansas City-owned property on the grounds of KCI Airport.

The school district, which is funded largely through local tax revenues, has historically been opposed to any legislation or negotiations that might infringe on its taxing jurisdiction, and would like to see the legislation die on the House floor. To that end, R-3 Superintendent Dr. Mark Harpst said Tuesday he would testify in opposition of the bill today (Wednesday) at the capitol in Jefferson City.

“Our Board wants to fight this legislation,” Harpst said. “The area in question is already an enterprise zone, which reduces the taxes 50 percent. We don’t want to see any further abatement. In our opinion, this will have a devastating effect on our district and its patrons. “

Harpst said he would be joined in front of the House’s Special Committee on Job Creation and Economic Development by Park Hill Superintendent Dr. Dennis Fisher. The Park Hill School District also has taxing jurisdiction in the proposed area.

The legislation, co-sponsored by District 30 State Rep. Jason Brown, a Platte City Republican, basically stems from the City of Kansas City’s desire to attract development to roughly 6,000 developable acres the City owns in the KCI Airport area. City officials say developers have in the past shied away from the land in question because the City will only lease the property and because they can go to other airport areas in other states where taxes are abated.

The R-3 Board heard those arguments and others in support of the bill last week when it listened to a presentation from attorney Chris Byrd, a Platte County R-3 graduate who has been hired as the City of Kansas City’s legal counsel in the matter.

Byrd, who said he expects the bill to pass the House “in a few weeks,” said the City is at a disadvantage because of the tax laws and said developers “will simply go elsewhere. We need this to bring more jobs to the area.”

Byrd said that Trammel Crow, a national real estate development and investment firm that specializes in airport property development, is building a \$20 million, 500,000 square-foot building in the area. But, he said, the City of Kansas City had to seal the deal by agreeing to pay the taxes on the building up to the lease price of \$250,000.

Byrd said Trammel Crow has indicated it may commit to 10 more phases of development if it gets additional economic incentive assistance.

“However, the City of Kansas City can’t keep paying the taxes for other buildings,” Byrd said. “That’s why this legislation is so important to the City.”

Byrd said Trammel Crow’s first building, which falls under the Park Hill District’s jurisdiction, will house 40-50 employees making \$55,000 to \$60,000 per year.

“There is no new development at KCI and there hasn’t been for two decades-plus,” Byrd said. “This will bring jobs to the area.”

Brown, reached by phone Monday afternoon, also said his main impetus for supporting the legislation is the creation of jobs.

“This is a win-win for everybody,” he said. “I don’t see how bringing in jobs like the ones we’re talking about could have a negative impact on the school district. I would have to question the school district’s desire to publicly state that it opposes bringing in \$55,000 per year jobs.”

Harpst said the R-3 School District is in favor of spurring economic development, but not at the expense of its patrons.

“Those who say this is a jobs creation issue are being very shortsighted, in my opinion,” he said. “They can call it what they want, but it comes down to transferring the tax burden from businesses to you and me and all the other homeowners and taxpayers in the district.”

Also at last week’s meeting, Byrd said the City of Kansas City is offering to make a Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) to the school district of eight cents per square foot for any future development that occurs at KCI within the R-3 boundaries.

Harpst pointed out to the Board that normally, a 500,000 square-foot building would generate about \$268,000 in tax revenues. As the airport property is in an enterprise zone, it means the district would only get 50 percent of that, \$134,000. Kansas City’s PILOT offer would translate into just \$40,000 of tax revenue on the building.

Byrd countered that currently, the school district is receiving nothing from the undeveloped land. He also said if the school district does not negotiate a PILOT deal, it would receive nothing in the future if the bill passes. He said that the City is open to negotiations with the school district.

“Supporting this legislation and working with Kansas City on a PILOT is the only option that brings the school district anything,” he said.

Brown also said Monday that the school district would not lose any revenue.

“Right now, they are getting zero from that property,” he said. “You can not lose what you are not receiving.”

School Board members expressed their opposition of the legislation.

“In my 10 years on the Board, it seems we have spent an incredible amount of time fighting Kansas City on issues like these,” Board President Bob Shaw said. “And now, they want to impose law. Case by case is one thing, but legislation? When is it going to end?”

Board member Patricia Stinnett said Brown should have approached the Board before the bill was filed on Feb. 7.

“I’m appalled that this issue was not brought to us by our own state representative, Jason Brown,” she said. “No one ever came to us and this bill was filed behind our back. Are you really wanting to be a partner?”

“There was no intention of going behind anyone’s back; it has always been the City’s intent to work with the school districts,” Byrd said. “In fact, we have been in negotiations for over one month now.”

Board discussion later centered on whether it should authorize Harpst to attempt to negotiate a PILOT deal, similar with deals it has struck over the years with such developments as the Harley-Davidson plant.

“We can’t control what state legislation does or does not pass, but we can control what part the school district plays in it,” Board member Carey Rolofson said. “We have been successful negotiating deals in the past that have benefited the district.”

Board members Dick Modin and Mary Temperelli agreed.

Later, though, after consulting with attorney John Cady, the Board decided to direct Harpst to fight the issue at the state level.

Harpst said the Board simply believes the issue is extremely important to the future financial health of the district.

“One of the reasons our tax levy is one of the lowest in the metropolitan area is because we protect our tax jurisdictions,” he said. “This is much different than a TIF agreement or some other incentive deal, because those have time frames. This legislation is forever. Five or 10 or 15 years down the road, there will be more students and inadequate funding. Revenues will be lost and the levy will go up. It’s not in the best interests of our kids or our patrons, in our opinion.”

Harpst said he is not ruling out negotiating a PILOT deal with Kansas City, but said, “there’s no guarantee we could reach a satisfactory figure. Eight cents is unacceptable.”

When asked if the City would negotiate with the school district after the bill is passed, Byrd replied, “If the bill is passed before a deal is reached, then I would say that the bill is passed before a deal is reached.”

Pirates football coach hired

The Platte County R-3 School District did not have to go very far to find its new head football coach. As first reported at plattecountycitizen.com, the district confirmed Tuesday that Pirates assistant coach Bill Utz had been hired to take over the Platte County program.

Utz, 36, replaces longtime coach Chip Sherman, 50, who stepped down last month after 191 wins and three state titles in 20 seasons.

“This a great opportunity, one that can’t be passed up,” Utz said. “Platte County is an excellent school and we have a great football program and the community support is incredible. I’m very excited.”

Utz was one of three candidates interviewed, along with St. Pius X coach Rick Byers and fellow assistant coach Jeff Humburg. Byers was offered the job first, but turned it down.

R-3 Athletic Director Phil Dorman said the district is pleased with its new coach.

“All three guys we interviewed were great candidates,” he said. “Bill is a man of high character and he has had success as a head football coach.”

Utz has been an assistant coach and social studies teacher at Platte County for three years. Prior to that, he spent six years as head football coach at Mid-Buchanan High School, where he posted a 24-38 record in six seasons. The record is deceiving, though. His first three years, Mid-Buch won just four games — the final three his teams won 20 of 32 games. Utz also led the Dragons to the school’s first-ever football playoff berth and victory in 2003.

Utz said he is counting on Humburg, an assistant for 12 years at Platte County, to remain on the staff.

“Between Jeff and I, that was a goal to keep it (the hire) in-house,” Utz said. “Jeff and I went to college together and we’ve talked about this. Basically, I don’t know that I would have taken the job if Jeff was not on-board with it.”

Humburg was disappointed, but said he was excited for Utz and the future of the Pirates program.

“Did I want the job? Yeah, of course, but that doesn’t mean I am not 100 percent behind Bill,” he said. “Bill and I have known each other for 18 years. I have no ill will about any of this. In fact, he and I are on the same page in most areas, and I’m excited about getting going and getting ready for another season.”

Utz will face a challenge in his first season. Not only will he be replacing one of the most successful coaches in state history, but Platte County has left the Midland Empire Conference and will join the Suburban Conference this year. The Pirates also move from Class 3 to Class 4 and will face schools with larger enrollment than it. Next year's schedule includes trips to Belton, Grandview, Park Hill South and the new Staley High School and home games against Raytown South, Hickman Mills and Kearney.

"There's a lot of unknown, what with a new coach, new conference and all that," he said. "But, that's where our tradition and the character of our kids and the support of our community comes in."

Utz said while there will be some changes, Pirates fans should not expect any major shakeups.

"You don't want to mess too much with a program that's been as successful as Platte County," he said. "There's a winning recipe here."

Utz is a native of Holton, Kan. and is a graduate of Benedictine College in Atchison, Kan. He is married and the father of three children ages six, four and nine months.

North Platte grad fires shot

It wasn't quite a shot heard round the world, but the shot fired from a naval ship off the coast of Hawaii to take down a crippled spy satellite did splash across the headlines last week and made one North Platte High School graduate very famous.

On Feb. 21, Navy Fire Controlman 2nd Class Andrew Jackson launched a SM-3 missile from the USS Lake Erie, which three minutes later collided with the satellite at a combined speed of approximately 22,000 miles per hour, 130 miles above the earth.

Jackson, a 1998 graduate of North Platte, appeared in Navy photos showing him launching the missile, and was soon the center of attention.

"It's a little overwhelming," he said. "It's certainly a lot more than what I'm used to."

The US government had been contemplating the fate of the defective spy satellite for the last several weeks. While most satellites are simply allowed to burn up in the Earth's atmosphere or remain in space, this satellite's fuel tank still contained about 1,000 pounds of frozen hydrazine propellant. Hydrazine, much like chlorine or ammonia, affects the lungs, and the tank could have survived reentry, spraying toxic fumes over an area roughly the size of two football fields. Shooting down the satellite and vaporizing the tank seemed the only option.

It was an unprecedented operation for the Navy, and Jackson received the order to fire from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates instead of a regular military commander.

"By all accounts this was a successful mission," said Gen. James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff early this week. "From the debris analysis, we have a high degree of confidence the satellite's fuel tank was destroyed and the hydrazine has been dissipated."

Jackson started on his path to shooting down spy satellites with a computer engineering degree from the University of Missouri at Rolla. His father served in the Navy, he said, and he opted to join the Navy himself to pay off college. After boot camp, he had the choice of going into technical work, or fire control.

"A buddy I went through boot camp with said fire control sounded cooler," he said.

He was told to list his dream jobs, and preferred locations for service, but said he didn't get either of his dream jobs, and had wound up in Hawaii instead of his favored San Diego, Calif. Despite this, he is enjoying his service.

"This is not where I expected to be at all, but it's good," Jackson said. "It's a very unique experience." Jackson lived with Sharon Crowder and her family in Edgerton for three years before heading off to Rolla for college.

"He was a neat kid and he still is," Crowder said, recalling his time with her family. "I can't remember a time he ever frowned. He was always uplifted, always smiling."

Crowder was surprised to discover the smiling boy who'd become a surrogate son to her was the one to shoot down the spy satellite on the news.

"We had been watching about the satellite in the newspapers, and when they said the shot had come from that ship we wondered," she said.