

# Nebraska Jo

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Thursday, February 2, 2006 Ponca, Nebraska 687

**Pro School meeting in Jackson Tuesday**

## **School bond opponents conduct meeting in Jackson, 110 plus show**

*By RD Volkman*

On the heels of President Bush's State of the Union Address where he announced he was earmarking new funds for research into Corn, Ethanol, and Hydrogen, to make America eventually independent from mid east oil, Paul Dorr orated on what the extreme left, for years, has been praying for: depression. He held out Minnesota's experiences as an example of failure. (Ed. note: High state income taxes have been driving industry from Minnesota for years.)

The key question, in the two plus hour event, came from a member of the audience: Have there been any studies on communities that passed bond issues that have experienced success? Dorr knew of none.

Dorr, claiming to be an Ag Economist, took issue with all of Siouxland's banks to the point of intimating their bank reserves were

not heavily regulated by State and Federal regulation.

Dorr, also claiming to be a good friend of Pam Miller, drug her name through the mud by association with a county commissioner anecdote. Pam Miller is Manager of Northeast Community College in South Sioux, a County Commissioner, and serves on the Ethanol plant board.

Dorr, alluding to old data, proclaimed Dixon County was losing population. He did not avail himself to the Northeast College study that found that all counties bordering Dakota County were growing.

Joli Gehring pointed out a \$10,000 error in an ABC meeting handout. Mike Brannon fessed up to the error, remarking he had been in a hurry when preparing it.

A female speaker's remarks, a former *Omaha World Herald* employee, about Dr. Kramper were sophomoric and inappropriate.

February 2, 2006 – Front Page of the Nebraska Journal-Leader:

**We will assume that the editor had a late night to meet his deadlines and did not have a chance to review his video tape of our Town Hall Meeting in Jackson on January 31, 2006.**

**Beyond the first paragraph where he expressed several opinions and interpretations, the remainder is full of half-truths, contortions of the truth, and outright lies.**

**Feedback from many who attended the two-and-a-half hour meeting indicates that the meeting was informative and professional. Of all of the questions submitted that night, it is interesting that the editor picked one that was submitted by a pro-bond attendee that had no answer. Mr. Dorr asked Mr. Charlson how he measured success, as the Iowa school district which built a new high school and which Charlson used for an illustration of “success” has continued to lose enrollment and had test score problems. Mr. Charlson did not offer his own measurement.**

**Mr. Dorr never did proclaim himself to be an “Ag Economist”. Rather, he detailed his background in the banking industry, explained how his family has an agricultural background, and referred to his brother, Tom Dorr, who is an Under Secretary of Agriculture for the USDA in Washington.**

**Mr. Dorr also did not claim to be a “good friend of Pam Miller.” The editor knows this is a lie since he was recording the presentation; front and center. Rather, Mr. Dorr and Mrs. Miller grew up in the same town within a block of each other. At no time did Mr. Dorr drag “her name through the mud by association with a county commissioner anecdote.” Again, it is on tape!**

**Our fine editor also states that Mr. Dorr alluded to old data concerning general population growth in “all counties bordering Dakota County.” But Mr. Dorr never mentioned the general population; he spoke exclusively of student population. It’s on the tape! But as long as the editor wants to lie about it, we’ll pick up on the point he raised. Although the general population is growing, the STUDENT population is declining dramatically; not just in Dixon County, but in the entire Sioux City metro area. Mr. Dorr also pointed out that there were 30 babies (birth to one year old) in Ponca in 1999 and only 9 in 2005. This can be seen in a graph on this website. This is exactly our point, where are the families with children going to come from to occupy their proposed new school?**

**The editor stooped to new lows when he referred to an alleged error by Mr. Brannon. The facts are that a SQUARE FOOTAGE calculation was done on the fly and in a hurry based on a question submitted by an audience member.**

**The question was “How big would the school need to be to house 200 students?” After scrambling to find the state of Nebraska requirements and punching numbers into a calculator, a figure of 25,600 square feet was given to the audience. The number was NEVER printed on any handouts. When the error was alluded to by Mrs. Gehring, Mr. Brannon immediately recalculated, stood up, and acknowledged the error as being approximately 10,000 square feet too low, not \$10,000. So much for rewarding honesty in a difficult situation! The editor’s report is a total fabrication.**

**And lastly, Mrs. Williams comments about Phil Kramper were funny, light-hearted, and surrounded by self-deprecating humor. She also mentioned how fine a man he was and talked about how she had a crush on him in college. Never were her comments inappropriate or childish.**

**The one handout offered to Mr. Volkman exclusively was not accepted. That was the Code of Ethics provided by the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The society's website points to the best Codes found on a state by state basis. Nebraska editors are pointed to the Code of the Lincoln Journal Star. ABCs believes the Introduction to the Journal Star code serves as an excellent reminder for our hometown editor. He may not divide our town so seriously if he would only abide by it. It begins with...**

**"We earn credibility through truthful reporting, ethical conduct, honesty and integrity. Without the trust of our readers, we will be unable to adequately perform our mission of providing news, analysis and an open forum for the exchange of ideas and opinions."**

**For examples of fair and unbiased reporting, see the articles about our town hall meeting below printed in the Sioux City Journal and the Dakota County Star, respectively.**



# Opponents of Ponca school bond host town hall meeting

By Michele Linck

Journal staff writer

JACKSON, Neb. — Opponents of a \$9.93 million, 30-year school bond issue set for a vote on Feb. 14 made their case Tuesday evening in a public information meeting at Jackson Public School and then opened the floor for questions. More than 150 people filled the bleachers in the gymnasium.

The bond proposal calls for a new 7-12 school on a donated parcel of undeveloped land west of Nebraska Highway 12 on the south edge of Ponca. A similar measure has been defeated twice before, the last time in a close vote in June.

The opponents, organized as the Alternative Building Construction Site committee, favor a new

school, but propose a less expensive solution and prefer the in-town site of the existing 89-year-old building which houses grades 7-12.

Michael Brannon, chairman of the ABCs committee, called for a thorough review of all facilities for all grades, K-12 so a districtwide plan can be made, and for an architect who favors renovation of old buildings to be hired to assess the prospects for fixing, rather than razing, the old building.

Brannon also said that 18 months ago "a prominent banker" told him a 30-year bond was a bad idea, that the district would have to offer a high interest rate to sell it. And, he said, the school board's architect and bond consultants have a conflict of interest since they make more money for a costly project.

The bulk of the presentation was made by ABCs consultant Paul Dorr of Ocheydan, Iowa. Dorr specializes in helping groups in the region defeat public school bond referendums. He drew repeatedly on examples of school districts in Minnesota and Iowa where he said taxpayers were left holding the bag for the debt of a new school as the numbers of students shrank.

Dorr challenged the business property tax that is projected to be generated by the new Siouxland Ethanol plant in Jackson, giving examples of other plants that won massive devaluations in appeals to their county boards of equalization.

And, Dorr presented a bar graph showing Ponca's population includes less than a third of the babies aged 0 to 1 than it did 10 years ago. He said it could take



People listen as **Susan Williams** speaks during a public meeting by opponents of the Ponca school bond referendum at the Jackson Public School Tuesday evening. (Staff photo by Jim Lee)

"8, 9, 10 new houses before you get one new child to go to school."

Dorr was preceded by Susan Darst Williams, an education watcher from Elkhorn, Neb., who writes daily for her Web site, Go-

BigEd.com. Williams told the audience that buildings reach a point of diminishing returns and that "fancy pants, Taj Mahal" buildings don't translate to a better education. Both she and Dorr said students often perform better

under adverse conditions.

People attending the session questioned the number of students the new school would hold, if it wouldn't cost the same to build on another site and if \$92 a square foot is a realistic construction cost. There was discussion over the necessity and costs of having a gym and whether one could generate revenue, of the cost of running three campuses (including the Jackson school) and of what would happen if the bond passed but the building couldn't be built for the stated amount.

Several people wondered what the role of distance education will be in the near future. One woman said perhaps student performance would be better if it weren't 100-degrees in the classrooms some days and if fuses didn't blow when some electronics were plugged in.



# Residents voice concerns at Town Hall meeting

By Sarah LaBrune

Star Editor

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The Jackson School gymnasium was filled with approximately 200 people on Tuesday night who were there to voice their concerns about the new Ponca School proposal.

Hosted by the ABCs Committee and led by Paul Dorr, committee consultant, the Town Hall meeting began with comments from Susan Williams of Omaha.

Williams used to be for bond issues to build new schools, but she has switched to be more academic minded. She stated there is significant money set aside for a gym at Ponca, which may not be necessary, and she brought up Ponca's test scores. According to Williams, who found her scores on the Nebraska Department of Education website, Ponca's seventh and eighth graders scored a 62 percent, which is below the national average and their ACT results are below the state average.

"You don't have to have everything perfect..." Williams said. "I want to see more strategic planning, work on financials and a debt plan."

Dorr also discussed the financial end of things and how other school districts that have passed bond issues are facing escalating costs with decreasing enrollment. He stated it is risky to depend on a new school to bring real estate to a town and on state aid, because it is tied to enrollment.

"You can't just keep piling on the debts with taxes," Dorr added.

Dorr stated in a tax impact statement, for \$100 in property the school will levy 26 cents,

which means a \$150,000 home in Ponca will end up paying roughly \$12,000 in taxes on the school over a 30-year period.

Also, Dorr added the contract with the architecture firms includes an agreement that even if the bond issue is not passed the school district must pay \$58,000 for pre-bond election services and the bond dealer will be owed about \$50,000.

Dorr said he also spoke to Pam Miller, vice president of Siouxland Ethanol LLC and she said about \$20 million will be added to the property tax base. However, Dorr advised listeners to not be dependent on the facility.

"So be careful with the Siouxland Ethanol Plant and its commitment to paying for this school district," Dorr said.

Before opening the meeting to questions, Dorr concluded that he compares building all these new schools in smaller communities is similar to mini bursts of Saddam Hussein's palaces.

Many attendees voiced concerns about the high cost of the gym in the proposed school plan and whether the gym would be able to help generate revenue by hosting tournaments.

Dorr said hosting events typically does not add up to more than \$1,000 every few years.

Mark Charlson of Ponca stated that in the past the communities of Jackson and Ponca have worked together to accomplish what needed to be done, like after the tornado in Jackson and the flood in Ponca, and now with the school.

"This is a relationship these towns have had for over 100 years," Charlson said. "Good or bad, we have to work together."

One woman asked if it is true

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## TOWN HALL

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that the elderly will not have to pay anything on the bond, as was reported in the Ponca Journal Leader.

Michael Brannon, chairman of the ABCs Committee and rural Ponca resident, answered by stating anything under \$40,518 in total valuation of house and land up to one-acre is subject to exemption.

Another woman said she has a child who struggles with school, but some problems with the current facility are there is no air conditioning during hot weather and some plug-ins in the classrooms do not work along with other things.

"There are a lot of things in the school right now that need to be fixed," she stated.

"We want to do something, but we don't want to put the future of the whole district at risk," Brannon said.

Dorr ended the meeting with a suggestion that perhaps the focus should be on academics and not on a new facility.

"New school building programs have not turned around academics," Dorr concluded.