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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 "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, GoBigEd.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.

[Back](#) | [Top](#) 

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