

## **County School enrollment to double in 10 years**

By Neal A. Shipman

McKenzie County Farmer Editor

If McKenzie County Public School District No. 1 school administrators thought that the rapid increase in elementary and high school students in Watford City was going to level off, they had better think again.

That was the message that Rob Schwarz of RSP & Associates shared with school board members during a special school board meeting on Feb. 3.

According to Schwarz, McKenzie County Public School District No. 1 can expect to see its enrollment increase by 50 percent in the next five years, and by 100 percent in 10 years.

"We're projecting that the district will have 2,583 students at the start of the 2019-20 school year, and that number will increase to 3,933 students by the start of the 2024-25 school year," stated Schwarz.

To put that growth in student numbers into perspective, since 2010, when the school district had 582 students, the enrollment has swelled by nearly 200 students a year. Today, the McKenzie County Public School District No. 1 has over 1,300 students attending classes.

"You are at the epicenter of the oil activity," stated Schwarz as he reviewed the demographic data with the school board. "The drilling rigs are moving into this area. And the families will follow the jobs here."

But, according to Schwarz, along with the growth in students, the board is going to have to address additional school buildings.

"You are going to struggle to keep up with capacity," stated Schwarz on the increased growth in student numbers. "You are going to run into problems at the existing elementary school very soon. And even though you are building a new high school, you are going to need more space."

The rapid growth in students in Watford City, according to Schwarz, is directly related to the rapid growth in housing in the community.

"If the number of housing units being constructed goes over 1,000, your numbers are going to explode," stated Schwarz. "Couple that with all the new businesses and the growth in the economy, and these projected student numbers could actually be low."

Steve Holen, school district superintendent, believes the projected enrollment numbers are realistic.

"We expected the numbers to still be very large, as they were in the first study performed in June of 2013," stated Holen. "However, they are larger than we have anticipated. The projection of 1,540 students in grades K-12 for 2015-2016 is a solid number and is in line with the growth seen for the 2014-2015 school year. And as the projection goes out to 2024-25, the student numbers increase to 3,933 students."

According to Holen, the new district enrollment projections put Watford City's student numbers at this year's enrollment numbers of Mandan, and slightly ahead of Williston and Dickinson.

And the increase in student numbers in Watford City means the school board needs to consider additional school buildings to meet the growth.

“While the projections out 10 years are variable on many factors, it does provide a possible growth factor the district needs to consider in its facility decisions to ensure we are allowing for the possibility of such growth,” states Holen. “The current new high school will accommodate these numbers well. However, the configuration of future elementary schools and the current high school as a middle school will need to be further explored if we begin to use these new projections.”

Holen also indicates that with the possibility of 3,933 students, the district will have to prepare for three to four elementary schools and potentially additional middle level facilities to feed the larger high school facility.

“The RSP demographers were asked to consider the current and potential economic environment in their study, which was considered in the numbers provided,” states Holen. “The demographers are still confident in the potential growth of our area given the number of permits being issued currently and our geographic location within the Bakken oil field.”

According to Schwarz, in developing their new enrollment numbers, RSP & Associates looked at the potential new residential and commercial building areas around Watford City and projected building permits.

“Clearly we underestimated the impacts three years ago. It is hard to quantify the numbers when Watford City is growing as fast as it is,” stated Schwarz. “The city is expecting to issue over 1,200 building permits in 2015, and there are already between 7,500 and 10,000 housing units planned.”

And Holen agrees that new projections accurately track Watford City’s and McKenzie County’s population projections.

“The prospect of such growth will bring challenges,” states Holen. “But in general, the outlook is very exciting. The opportunity to educate students as our student population grows can be enhanced with additional offerings and classes that are available with a larger student population.”

However, according to Holen, while the district is very positive and optimistic with the growth projections, they need to continually monitor the growth and the economic conditions that dictate the growth.

“We want to make sure our planning decisions are efficient and valid uses of public dollars, and ultimately are good decisions for the education of youth in McKenzie County,” states Holen on the need to add additional school buildings. “It is important we do sufficient planning to avoid duplication or inefficiencies with our current projects if the growth projections are met in the future, and to provide contingencies if the projections do not become reality.”