

Western Dubuque joins MVC in tight vote

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Western Dubuque Bobcats will become the 16th member of the Mississippi Valley Conference in the 2018-19 school year.

The Western Dubuque school board approved the switch from the Wamac Conference to the Mississippi Valley Conference by the slimmest of votes, 3-2, at their meeting Monday night.

The new Liberty High School in North Liberty also will be joining the MVC for the 2018-19 school year as the conference grows from 14 schools to 16.

This will be the first major change in the Mississippi Valley Conference since 1992, when Regis, Cedar Falls, Waterloo West and Waterloo East joined the league. Xavier joined the MVC in 1998 when Regis and LaSalle merged to form one high school.

There was considerable debate at the Western Dubuque school board meeting before a roll-call vote was taken. The first school board member voted against the move, but the next three members voting in favor to approve the measure, ending the suspense. The fifth and final member voted no, but did not affect the outcome.

"It was a 3-to-2 vote, so a little bit close, but still a majority said yes, so we're on our way to the MVC to be up and running by 2018-19," Western Dubuque athletic director John Hlubek said in a telephone interview shortly after the meeting.

"It was the last item on our school board agenda and the room was packed," he said. "It was what everybody was waiting to see. There were a few people that think it's not the right move and there were a lot of people who thought it was the right move.

"It's like anything," Hlubek remarked. "There's always some for and some against. The exciting

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thing is, a majority said yes and so we're looking forward to it."

Western Dubuque currently has approximately 880 students in grades 9 through 12, according to Hlubek. Western Dubuque is currently the biggest school in the Wamac, but it will become the third-smallest school in the Mississippi Valley Conference, topping only Xavier and Dubuque Wahlert.

Liberty High School will open for the 2017-18 school year and its total enrollment for Year 1 and Year 2 has yet to be determined.

"We're growing," said Hlubek. "We're about 279 kids bigger than the next biggest school in the Wamac, so we're like the big fish in the small pond. When we get to the MVC we'll be right toward the bottom. We'll be a small fish in a big pond."

Hlubek said the two board members who voted "no" are not convinced it was a good idea to change leagues at this time.

"They just want to make sure we're doing the right, that we're not jumping into it," he said. "They said, it's not like we totally dominated the Wamac Conference."

The Bobcats have been a member of the Wamac Conference since 2003.

Hlubek conducted two surveys of the Western Dubuque coaches in recent months to get their input about the possible move. The school district also held a public forum, and Hlubek invited four athletic directors from MVC schools to speak to his coaches about the league.

"They can't say that we jumped right into it," Hlubek remarked, referring to people who were against the change. "We were methodical and tried to give everyone a chance to give input."

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"I'm for it, the principal is for it, the superintendent is for it. We just think it's the best thing for us down the road."

Randy Krejci, the commissioner of the Mississippi Valley Conference, welcomes Western Dubuque into the league.

"I'm really excited," said Krejci. "It's certainly good news. They're going to make a great fit into the league. We're definitely going to welcome them with open arms."

Krejci said the current MVC schools must vote to officially accept Western Dubuque into the league, but said it will be a mere formality.

"Now it's all systems go for 2018-19 when they're in the league fully," he said.

Krejci noted that Western Dubuque has already been competing against MVC schools in non-conference events and postseason tournaments and holding its own against the bigger schools.

Krejci said the MVC athletic directors will divide the league into two eight-team divisions once Western Dubuque and Liberty begin competing in the conference.