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By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times In an effort to help boost the city's business community, Liberal city commissioners recently voted to hire the Owasso, Okla.-based consulting firm, Retail Attractions, to assist in making contacts with many nationwide merchants.

Tuesday, Liberal Economic Development Director Jeff Parsons brought members of that board, the Seward County Commission and the USD No. 480 Board of Education up to speed on those efforts and others being made to bring business to town.

Parsons said since the move to hire Retail Attractions, some smaller companies have come to look at Liberal.

"A lot of companies are expanding their workforce," he said. "One of the things that we are going to come up on before too long is we are starting to get a little bit short on industrial space around town. Buildings are a little sparse right now."

One of those businesses, a nationwide semi-trailer sales and service company, Parsons said has committed to come to Liberal. "It's not a huge operation – five- to 10-plus jobs," he said. "We'll know more about that soon. They're still finalizing deals on their building."

Parsons then went on to talk about retail, noting the industry does provide a good number of jobs to the Liberal community.

"They're not the highest paying jobs, but they're good steady jobs," he said. "It provides quality of life for folks who come to town. It provides sales tax revenue. City, county both have the designated sales tax, so any additional retail we have increases the revenue we got off sales tax."

Parsons next talked about Retail Attractions and what it can do for Liberal's economy.

"The founder of Retail Attractions was an economic development director in the town of Owasso about the time that Owasso was kind of blowing up with a lot of folks moving into town," he said. "It sits right on an interstate with lots of traffic."

Parsons said in Owasso alone, Retail Attractions founder Rickey Hayes had sat in on the development of more than four million square feet of retail.

"He's worked with lots of folks," he said. "Now, he does for other towns what he did there in Owasso."

Parsons said working with Retail Attractions increases the effectiveness of the city's retail recruiting efforts.

“We talk to real estate people,” he said. “We talk site selectors. We talk to developers. We talk to brokers. We’re just kind of white noise. We’re like every other community that does this.”

Parsons said many other economic development directors across the country are calling companies such as Retail Attractions to help bring business to their communities.

“They’re all talking to these people,” he said.

Parsons, along with Hayes, will be attending the country’s largest retail real estate convention in Las Vegas soon, and Parsons said the Retail Attractions head is making a difference there as well.

“Rickey has already arranged four appointments with me with four separate developers,” he said. “That’s something I couldn’t have walked in there in any number of years and been able to do that. We’ve already cut through and sped this process up by a number of years just by working with him.”

Parsons said Liberal has a proven draw of business.

“People shop in Liberal who don’t live in Liberal,” he said. “Around town, we have a good plan and desirable locations, and our traffic patterns are good. There are good traffic flows in and around shopping areas in Liberal. Our demographics are good. Populations are high. Our household incomes are well above what retailers look at. We’ve got all the pieces to the puzzle, and Retail Attractions could be that thing that would bring all those pieces together and help us really successfully recruit retail.”

Parsons next talked about another new business Liberal could be seeing soon.

“Rue 21 is a clothing retailer,” he said. “They’re going to be filling the spot that was vacated by Hastings. They’ve actually started work on that building. They’ll be in there in no time at all probably close to the end of the month or the first part of June.”

Parsons said another company is looking at moving into a building next to Dillon’s in north Liberal.

“We’re hoping they will take that space,” he said. “They’re already negotiating with the landlord.”

Following Parsons presentation, city commissioner Joe Denoyer talked about the need for more local business.

“You’re seeing almost \$45 million leaving in building materials going to Amarillo, going to Lowe’s and Home Depot,” he said. “As you look to recruit one of those, they’re going to have several employees they may have to bring in from the outside.”

Denoyer explained how a growing business community ties into the rest of Liberal’s economy.

“Housing issues will surface,” he said. “School issues will also surface as we continue to move forward with Retail Attractions.”

Denoyer agreed with Parsons, saying the Owasso firm is already making a difference in the local economy.

“Two weeks after we’d hired this guy, the list of phone calls he’d already made, the list of contacts he’d already made for the city was just phenomenal,” he said. “This guy’s already got his foot in the door. You can see things progress.”

Opportunity gap

Total Retail Leakage – \$307,660,575 Non-Store Retailers – \$73,096,952 Building
Materials – \$44,697,907

Health and Personal Care –

\$31,606,669

Supermarkets – \$22,986,238

Full Service Restaurants – \$22,255,053

Limited Service Restaurants –

\$20,053,550

Sporting Goods, Hobby, Books and

Music – \$16,033,696

Electronics and Appliances –

\$15,565,119

Clothing – \$14,746,957

Home Furnishings – \$7,370,098

Office Supplies, Stationery, Gift –

\$5,527,495

Specialty Food Stores – \$4,134,215

The opportunity gap represents the difference between retail sales in specific categories of goods and services where reported demand (purchases by consumers living in an area) exceeds reported sales by merchants (supply) within the same defined trade area. Data is derived from the Consumer Expenditure as administered by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and from the Census of Retail Trade, made available through the U.S. Census.

SOURCE – Retail Attractions

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