By KEELEY MOREE

• Leader & Times

If there's one thing Mid-American Air Museum director Jim Bert has learned in the past nine months, it's that it takes a community to bring dinosaurs back to life.

One of the most anticipated local attractions of the year, "Dinosaurs of Kansas," is reaching the home stretch as employees and volunteers continue construction and preparations for the opening day of the prehistoric exhibit next month.

Bert explains that "Dinosaurs of Kansas" will feature 10 animatronic dinosaurs as well as information on their lives in jurassic times.

"The theme of the exhibit will emphasize predator versus prey with the tension and drama of what it must have been like to live among the dinosaurs 100 million years ago," Bert said. "They are animatronic, they do move and we will have special lighting, sound effects and landscape to lend a sense of realism to the scenes."

While living dinosaurs have been gone for millions of years, it's been more than a decade since these lifelike dinosaurs visited the museum in 1990 and 1996.

"I arranged for the first dinosaur exhibit and I had accepted another job, so my last day here was the first day of the dinosaur exhibit. Others carried on after me," Bert said about the 1990 exhibit. "I remember when I went to my board the first time and said, 'Let's go look at dinosaurs,' they were skeptical. But it proved to be something that helped save the museum and we want to continue that tradition of bringing in something nice for the community."

"It's funny," Bert added. "When you talk to folks in the 'dinosaur industry,' they will say that those years were the 'rubber chicken era' of dinosaur animatronics. Now they are so lifelike and articulate and move much more naturally – they are impressive."

Bert explained that the exhibit will provide more than just a walk through the museum.

"What we hope to do is to direct people as they go through the exhibit to look at a particular dinosaur or two instead of seeing the whole thing at once. We'll have lighting, fog, sound – it will be an experience," he said. "We will have a service called 'On Cell' where you can bring your cell phone and punch in a number to carry it around to the different dinosaur stations to hear more about each dinosaur."

Making space for the exhibit in the museum meant nearly 20 airplanes needed to "disappear" to make room for a walking path, special lighting, informational displays, landscaping and the dinosaurs themselves. Bert said a "core group" of 15 volunteers have joined many other supporters and employees who have moved the project along.

"What you see is an enormous and very gratifying, very much appreciated community effort," Bert said as he motioned towards work volunteers have done so far. "This isn't just the museum, this isn't just a small group, it's people coming together, giving of themselves and their time and talents."

Saundra Koochel and the SCCC drama club have played a major role in painting backdrops

and scenery throughout the exhibit. Jeff Mitchell has put in effort “building” rocks to house informational displays and Southern PioneerElectric/Pioneer Electric Cooperative cut and donated recycled telephone poles to line walkways with natural wood.

Bert said these volunteer names are only a few of many who have contributed resources, time and talent.

“The City of Liberal brought trees in. At the staff meeting when we were asked what we needed, I said I wanted dead trees – and I got them,” Bert added with a laugh. “We have 11 and they’re very nice dead trees.”

In addition, there are roughly 50 businesses, organizations and individuals who have donated funds for students to visit the exhibit. A Kansas Tourism grant has also been received and Southern Pioneer Electric/Pioneer Electric Cooperative have been named a joint sponsor of the show for providing the largest single donation.

The exhibit itself is expected to bring an unprecedented number of visitors into Liberal.

“To date we have over 5,500 students coming. That’s almost more than the total number of students who have come over the past 10 years,” Bert explained. “Last year we had 2,000 children come for our NASA exhibit, which was a landmark year. Of course, this year with the dinosaurs we get phone calls every day with several hundred more children coming.”

Bert hopes the exhibit will be enjoyed not only by school children, but the community as a whole.

“Aviation will always be our core business, but we also want to serve the community and bring nice things in here that folks and our citizens can come see,” he said. “They don’t have to go to Kansas City or Dallas and Denver. We can have quality programs and exhibits here.”

An invitation-only premiere for donors and sponsors will take place the evening of April 5 with the project opening to the public from April 6 to May 5. Visitors can see the exhibit Mon. - Fri. from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Sundays from 1 to 5 p.m.

“We also are offering chances for children to have birthday parties here and even sleep with the dinosaurs,” Bert mentioned. “We have one family, for instance, who bought a ‘Sleep with the Dinosaurs’ night.”

The dinosaurs themselves are expected to arrive any day now, and Bert is satisfied with how the exhibit is taking shape.

“I feel very good about the progress. Had it not been for our extraordinary support from the community, we couldn’t have done it,” he said. “To do this type of exhibit work is very unique and anytime you start doing anything unique and labor extensive, it can get expensive. It’s only because of the gifts of people’s time and talent that we’ve been able to do something at a fraction of a cost that this could have been.”

For more information about the exhibit, contact the museum at (620) 624-5263 or visit www.visitliberal.com.