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City staff and friends laugh with public works director Joe Sealey Wednesday during Sealey's retirement reception at the Girl Scout Building in Light Park. Several other departments produced video spoofs with Sealey being the target of their affections. L&T photo/Rachel Coleman

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

'More than a boss, he was a friend'

It was the day before a holiday, a hot, sunny afternoon — but that didn't stop hundreds of City of Liberal employees from showing up to say goodbye to Joe Sealey at his retirement reception Wednesday afternoon. The Girl Scout building at Light Park filled with coworkers eager to share anecdotes, jokes and gifts with a supervisor who had clearly earned their love and respect.

“You’re more than a boss,” said more than one member of the street department. “You’re a friend.”

“We’ll miss you, Joe,” was the refrain, as city employees served up cake, punch and presents for Sealey, who has served as director of public works since 1997.

A lifelong Seward County resident, business owner, and former county commissioner, Sealey earned a reputation for pinching pennies and for working as hard as the crews he supervised. Coworkers related stories of concrete-pouring after 5 p.m., problem-solving and camaraderie that transcended race, rank and language.



“A poor man makes do with what he’s got,” Sealey said in an interview reviewing his years at the city. “You make it work. I guess I’ve never outgrown that.”

Sealey spoke in his office, which was tucked in the back corner of City Hall and crowded with rolls of blueprints and schematics, evidence that Sealey’s love for learning drew him into territory usually occupied by engineers.

“You get more out of things that you learn and figure out on your own, than things that you just go out and buy,” Sealey said. “If it’s too easy, you’ll never get the satisfaction that comes from figuring out a problem.”

Sealey's fondness for do-it-yourself solutions was spoofed in a retirement-reception video produced by Police Chief Al Sill, in which Sill and several officers imagined how the Liberal Police Department would operate, "if Joe Sealey was in charge." Two police officers dressed in ragged overalls drove a rusted pick-up truck across town, a horn strapped on the hood with duct tape.

"Hand me the baling wire," one said as they prepared to respond to a call. "I need to hold the door shut."

Sill later spoke, expressing affection and respect for Sealey, ending with a parting shot in which he called him "cheap," with a wide smile. Fire Chief Kelly Kirk shared personal memories of going to Sealey's fish and tackle shop as a boy.

"When I was a kid, I thought Joe was meaner than a rattlesnake," he said, "but now I know he's got a big heart and he really cares about people." The Fire Department offered a video of firefighters jumping rope with the hoses, and dancing to the music "The Harlem Shake."

Sealey said he enjoyed every aspect of his reception — including the jokes and satire and even the location, pointing out that "the Girl Scout building is a great example of what I like most about my job. Everything inside that building was done by our city crews, and it's a bright, cheerful place. The thing I am the most proud of, in my time at the city, is the staff, and their ability and creativity and initiative."

Working in local government was a good fit for the Southwest Kansas native. Sealey's father farmed and ranched northeast of Liberal, just two miles from where Sealey and his wife Teresa now live. The couple returned to Liberal after Sealey finished his service in the U.S. Army, and raised two sons, Jeff and Brian. Sealey worked for Jack Engel for several years, leased and operated a gas station, opened a tackle, boat and lawn mowing shop, and eventually moved to the country where he continues to ranch. His first involvement with local government was his appointment to the county's rural fire board in 1986. Next, he ran for, and won a spot on the Seward County Commission. In 1997, around the time that he closed his tackle shop, Sealey was invited to apply for a job with the city. He took it, and never looked back.

"It's like coming to an adult kindergarten class every day," he said. "You get to learn everyone's

name, get to know them, find out what they're good at. You're all in it together. I'm a person who's very comfortable working with the common man, and there's nothing better than working with the people I've gotten to know here at the city."

When he arrived at city hall, Sealey recalled, "my first impression was that we had some extremely talented people who were just being wasted — nobody was utilizing their abilities, or giving them a chance to try anything new. They were tired of the same old stuff, and they were glad to have a chance to accept the challenge to do more."

Evidence of Sealey's willingness to take on ambitious projects can be seen across Liberal, from the tree-lined walking paths that trace the major traffic routes, to neatly repaired sidewalks, improved park facilities, elements of the water park and various recreational buildings. Tourism director Sally Fuller recalled hearing a rumor that Sealey might be retiring, just as she learned Liberal had won the prestigious Kansas Sampler Festival hosting rights.

"I said, 'Joe, please stick around until the second year of the Sampler wraps up,'" she said. "I can't imagine how we could have done it all without his help."

Sealey also left a legacy in terms of the city's long-range water supply; he pushed to obtain additional water rights. and to secure and improve the city's water infrastructure.

"We had several old, marginal wells in operation, and I wanted to move to some young wells, that would exceed what we were appropriated," Sealey said. "We developed some new fields of water, and I think the city will be set for 100 years or so. There's no guarantee, of course, but it was the right move for the long term."

As to concerns about climate change and drought, Sealey said "the older I get, the more I notice things, and in terms of climate change, I'm not really concerned. The climate change here in Kansas is something that happens about every day."

Liberal itself is in a slow, steady cycle of development, Sealey noted.

“I’ve watched people leave, and I’ve heard people express their ideas about everything that’s wrong with the town. I think that if you can’t live with it here, you’re probably going to find something wrong with whatever place you go.”

Since his days at Liberal High School, Sealey “used to know everyone in town. I don’t anymore; things are changing,” he said. “Even though some people want it to go faster, I don’t think we’re falling behind. Liberal’s made a lot of progress and with the leadership of the commission, we’re going to keep going.”

City manager Mark Hall and longtime city clerk Debbie Giskie share Sealey’s optimism, with one reservation.

“There’s no way we can replace him,” said Giskie, “and it’s going to be a huge change to operate the city without him.”

For the time being, Sealey plans to serve as a consultant two days a week, until the city can hire and train a new director of public works. The rest of the time, he said, “I’m going to see if I can get tired of fishing.”

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