

By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

The Joint Economic Development Council recently conducted a business roundtable discussion to hear from local retail business owners to find out how Liberal should approach community growth.

During the discussion, Seward County Commissioner Jim Rice said that support from the City of Liberal and Seward County is vital in expecting any kind of growth.



“Let’s consider something I believe could be a very positive thing for prospective developers, business franchises and our community that has had very little action or attention over the past many years,” he said. “The building of infrastructure, yes, utility service, sewer systems, streets, curb and gutter as an example. What if city and county government had the foresight in the past to invest in such things to encourage a prospective businesses or new residences, would we be holding this meeting today to try to figure out what we need to do to attract new business or improve our retail selection?”

Rice also pointed out that the county recently sold 60 lots that have been dormant for 17 years after the county took ownership of the property for unpaid taxes. He said if the city and county would have invested infrastructure funding to those lots 17 years ago for an investment of \$850,000, that 60 homes built on the property would have generated \$900,000 in property tax in

10 years.

“Would those 60 additional families have provided purchasing power and increased the need for more retail?” he asked the group. “Would a company looking to expand or build new be interested in a community that has the support of local government, knowing the potential for community expansion would only improve the need for more of their products in the future?”

Rice said there is a role for local government to play in expanding the community if taken in small steps. Until there is a partnership between private and local units of government, Rice said the current model of expecting developers and retail businesses to provide all the expense for infrastructure as well as construction will continue to stunt Liberal’s growth.

“Today, we are considering if the present system is working as it should and providing the growing retail and residential community we dream of,” he said. “Are we willing to continue ‘talking’ as other communities draw our retail shoppers to their community, or are we willing to ‘act’ to change the tide? That, my friends, is for you to decide.”

JEDC representatives said they planned to schedule more roundtables with other aspects of the community, including agriculture, energy and others.