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Children from the “Robot Warriors” team cluster around an informal play station Saturday at Mid-America Air Museum with plenty of LEGO blocks. Though the LEGO robotics program focuses on computer programming and other topics connected to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) education, “the students enjoyed relaxing and just building,” Bert said. Courtesy photo

Grants fund next event for Feb. 22

By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

After the Mid-America Air Museum hosted a successful LEGO robotics expo last weekend, director Jim Bert was back before the Liberal City Commission Tuesday to update the board and request funding for the next robotics event.

Bert asked that \$7,600 in grant and donation funds be released to MAAM, in order to stage the Feb. 22 tournament for students in grades 4 to 8.

"We're coming off our most successful First LEGO League expo," Bert said. "I can tell you that Liberal is the premier robotics community in this 100-mile radius, and we are at the forefront of technology and engineering education for students." What's more, Bert added, "the young children, from kindergarten to third grade, were delighted. The expo was a wonderful affair."

Five communities brought 11 teams to the weekend event, which drew more than 260 visitors to the air museum. Participants included Perryton, Texas, Tyrone, Beaver, a Boy Scout troop from Garden City, Meade, Deerfield, Hugoton, and students from Southlawn, McDermott and McKinley elementary schools in Liberal.

At the beginning of the 2013-14 school year, MAAM offered every elementary and intermediate school in Liberal a robotics kit and support to begin a club. Though the projects displayed at the weekend expo were beginner-level, Bert said the activity quickly moves on to serious science.

"This is the robotics system used at the Navy academy for first-year engineering students," he told the board of commissioners. "This is engineering and programming, not radio or remote control. Those children have to program the robots they build to complete the tasks required."

In addition to scientific savvy, Bert said the expo, part demonstration, part science fair-style display, part competition, required heavy volunteer involvement and support from the city. The fact that LEGO robotics is a new concept made the venture a bit more complicated.

"I've told people throughout the process, it's like we're trying to set up a basketball tournament with 14 teams coming to town," he said. "There's all the work involved with that, organizing, getting the facilities ready — but imagine that everyone you've asked to volunteer, has never seen a basketball before."

Despite the newness of the event, Liberal residents came through on Saturday.

"It was a tremendous outpouring of support for this community and others," Bert said. "Along with a group of dedicated judges who evaluated each team, we were honored to have Kelly Kirk and Liberal Fire Department there, because the theme was 'Disaster Blaster.'"

Bert said the participating children were delighted to meet the real, live firefighters, and receive their participation ribbons and winners' trophies from Kirk. Liberal Parks and Recreation department transported and set up bleachers in the air museum, and members of the Girl Scouts' First LEGO League team, led by Jim and Michele Stoddard, presented a demonstration to the younger robotics students, "to give them a sense of what lies ahead," Bert said.

City of Liberal vice mayor Janet Willimon served as one of seven judges for the expo and briefly took on the role of cheerleader during the Tuesday commission meeting.

"I just want to say, 'rah-rah-rah!'" she exclaimed. "Jim, the expo was absolutely fabulous. You guys have done a fabulous job."

The commission approved Bert's request unanimously, designating \$2,600 for computerized scoring technology support for the LEGO tournament, \$2,000 for volunteer meals and logistics and \$3,000 for event "arena" technology, including cameras, cable, converters, amplifiers and other equipment.

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