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Board will offer trade perspective on city ordinances

By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

Citizens who disagree about the interpretation of current City of Liberal building codes or want to appeal a decision by city inspectors may soon have another avenue to voice their opinion.

At the Tuesday meeting, Liberal City Commissioners approved the first reading of an ordinance to establish a Building Safety Board of Appeals.

The board would be appointed by the city commission and work closely with director of building services and code enforcement Kory Krause, said city manager Mark Hall.

“Part of Kory’s plan is to meet with licensed contractors and professionals, along with regular meetings with the (new) board,” said Hall. “Of course, on a day-to-day basis, he would always be available as needed.”



Krause, who routinely meets with contractors and property owners to answer questions and problem-solve as projects unfold, said the new board would eliminate many repeat problems and issues. He also described it as a way to address new technologies as they are introduced and keep contractors up to date with amendments to the building codes.

For example, if he begins to hear the same complaints or questions about a specific issue from a variety of electricians, the Building Safety Board of Appeals might meet to discuss the issue and explore solutions.

Krause said that state law does not allow municipalities to minimize the code standards, but that there is leeway to maximize them. However, within those guidelines are many situations where it’s not clear how regulations apply. That’s when people begin to get frustrated. The new board can serve as intermediary and advocate.

While the city commissioners have the final say on policy enforcement, “the building safety board provides another alternative for the contractors to go to.” Hall said. “It’s also consistent with the surrounding area, and it’s always nice when you go from one city to the other and it’s consistent.”

“It’s going to make things easier for everyone,” Krause said. “New codes are presented every three years, and I’d like to get the contractors’ opinions on that.”

The board would consist of:

- One licensed master plumber

- One licensed master electrician

- One licensed master mechanical

- One licensed residential contractor

- One licensed commercial contractor

- One architect licensed in the state of Kansas

- One at-large citizen.

All members would be approved by the city commission, and would serve three-year terms, with the inaugural board serving staggered terms of two and three years in order to set up a regular rotation of members.

Krause described the board's role as oversight of application for appeals, "based on a claim that the true intent of the current code or the rules legally adopted have been incorrectly interpreted, the provisions of this code do not fully apply, or an equally good or better form of construction is proposed."

In other words, the board will provide a pathway for contractors or property owners who have

come into conflict or confusion with standing codes. Rather than engaging in a tug-of-war, where the city attempts to enforce compliance and the citizen resists, the situation can move to a process designed to help both parties understand the other, talk through the concerns and examine possible solutions. The board's members, all engaged in the actual work up for discussion, can provide valuable insight about how to make policies work in common-sense, everyday ways.

As head of code enforcement, Krause would call the board to meet when needed.

"This will, basically, help me a lot," he said.

Vice-mayor Janet Willimon asked for clarification about the board's make-up and organization.

"This board will consist of city-county residents?" she said. "Tell me more about it."

Krause specified that the contractors appointed to the board must hold City of Liberal licenses for their trades.

"And we (the commission) get to pick and choose who's going to be on that board, ultimately?" Willimon asked.

Hall said that the procedure for board selection would be the same as that used for other board appointments: people may apply, department heads will offer their recommendations, and the board of commissioners will make the final selection.

"I'm sure that you, Kory, will welcome that help," Willimon said.

Krause agreed that commission input would be ideal as the board is assembled.

Mayor Dave Harrison moved to adopt the first reading of the ordinance, and Dean Aragon seconded his motion. The city commissioners voted unanimously to move forward with the establishment of a Building Safety Board of Appeals.

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