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Co-chair of Citizens For Responsible Growth Earl Watt, left, congratulates Robert Burkey after the vote came in April 8 on the school bond issue. Burkey has accepted a job offer from former USD No. 480 Superintendent Lance Stout who is working in a school district in Independence, Mo. L&T photos/Rachel Coleman

USD 480 auxiliary services director headed to Independence, Mo.

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Liberal USD No. 480 director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey has announced he will not return to the district for the 2014-15 school year. Instead, Burkey will begin work as director of

facilities for the Independence, Mo., school district where former USD 480 Superintendent of Schools Lance Stout moved one year ago. Stout currently serves as deputy superintendent of that district.

“It’s tough, because we just saw the bond issue pass, and the only hesitation I had about the move is that I wanted to see the bond issue (projects) through,” Burkey said. “I really wanted to be part of the construction process. But for myself and for my family, we feel it’s the best future for us.”

USD 480 Superintendent of Schools Paul Larkin said he feels positive about the turn of events.

“First of all, what I told Mr. Burkey is I’m never going to hold anyone back from having a better situation. I wish him the best,” Larkin said. “He’s been a great right-hand person throughout this bond issue, did a great job in helping boost the community engagement. He’s been a very valuable, very knowledgeable person to have on board.”

That said, Larkin put in, “You have to move forward. One individual is not going to deter the process. Mr. Burkey’s position, of course, has been out front and in the face of it, but our architecture firm, the construction managers are there and on the financial side, Mr. (Jerry) Clay has a lot more involvement, with the process as it unfolds. A lot of people including myself will step up.”

Burkey, who took over auxiliary services in USD 480 three years ago after more than a decade managing the local bowling alley, said jobs like the Independence position don’t often become available.

“An opportunity like this doesn’t repeat itself very often,” he said. “The person here retired after 30 years. The person there is retiring. When the opportunity comes, it’s something you don’t just pass up. You’re not going to get it very often.”

One of more than 20 people who interviewed for the job in Independence, Burkey went through three rounds of interviews before he received the job offer.

“In my position in this district, there won’t be room for advancement,” he said. “The only advancement I can present myself is moving to a bigger district.”

In Independence, Burkey will manage 31 attendance centers, nearly three times the buildings for which he is responsible in Liberal. However, he said, “it’s only facilities. Here, I’m in charge of transportation, food service, custodial, maintenance, purchasing and warehousing.”

Burkey’s current contract with USD 480 continues through June 30, and he will finish the school year and oversee summer operations before the family moves.

The opening in Missouri “came along pretty quick,” Burkey said. “In the long run, it makes sense for our family.” With children ages 10 and 7, Burkey said he didn’t want to make a move once they reached junior high or high school age.

His wife’s parents, who live just 45 minutes from the family’s new location, “are thrilled,” Burkey said. “We’re excited, too, but probably not as much as Grandma and Grandpa are.”

As he looks ahead to the next chapter in his professional life, Burkey admits to sadness on the personal front.

“We’ve been here 17 years and have some great friends. Really incredible friends, and they’ve been supportive and happy for us,” he said. “That makes you feel great. You know you’ve got great friends when they say they’re sad to see you go, but they’re still happy for you.”

As for the district, applications have already flowed in to the Central Office, and Larkin, along with Deputy Superintendent Renae Hickert and Human Resources Jason McAfee, began to review submissions on Tuesday.

“Typically, what we do when we hire a director’s position, we ask board members, myself, Mr. McAfee, Mrs. Hickert, a couple principals, to serve on a committee,” Larkin said. “I’m confident we’ll find the right person for the job.”

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