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By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader After Seward County Commissioner Jim Rice proposed promoting two county employees to run the fairground facilities Tuesday, feedback was heard from members of the commission as well as the fair board and county department heads. During the county's work session, Rice had suggested bringing on maintenance director Delbert Stebens and county employee Linda Johnson as co-coordinators of the Activity Center following the resignation of Janet Lewis in May. Commissioner Toby Hale pointed out that being a co-coordinator would mean more responsibility for Stebens.

"Does he have time for it?" Hale asked.

Stebens agreed saying his department does stay busy.

"I have staff that's spread all over town," he said. "We spend 65 to 70 percent of our time out there. That's where a lot of our work is."

Commission chair Joyce Hibler talked about the areas of work Stebens and Johnson would be doing in addition to maintenance.

"You're going to be answering the phone, answering people, taking money," Hibler said. "This isn't just going to be maintenance. You're going to have a little more than normal."

Johnson said whatever is done needs to be done through a team effort.

"Everybody says we're a family," she said. "We need to be a family, and we need to work together."

County clerk Stacia Long said there are likewise budgetary responsibilities involved with the job.

"That's a big responsibility," she said. "Delbert pays for a lot of materials for out there out of his maintenance, but not all. It's not really cut and dry. Maybe that's something that can be a little more clear."

Road and bridge supervisor Tony Herrman said communication is also a key issue, and for him, there seems to be a lack of it between the county and the fair board.

"We want to volunteer and help, and we've always tried to," he said. "We've tried to assist with every function when we were asked to. The problem is I've got other things scheduled to do and to try to provide for this. It's for the community. It's for the fairgrounds. You've got thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars of improvements, and you're going to put more improvements in. The facility needs to be utilized."

Herrman added that having less volunteers than in the past means department heads are

having to pay everyone, and they must absorb those costs through their budgets.

“Everybody’s going to be faced with a tough budget this year. The county’s revenues are down,” he said.

Herrman said he would simply like to see what his department needs to provide before an event contract is agreed upon.

“It’s easier to get events if you’ve got a good facility,” he said. “It all goes hand in hand, but you’ve got to spend money to make money.”

Herrman said essentially, road and bridge needs to be told what’s going on early enough so plans can be made.

“I’m having to make people work to provide the services that we’ve agreed to with contracts,” he said.

Many, including fair board president Jeff Louderback, applauded Rice’s idea.

“I think what you’re trying to do is great,” he said. “Give it a six-month trial and see. The main problem I have is communication. We don’t need a chief out there telling me I can’t do something when I know I can. Delbert and Linda help us a great deal. I know this year, we lost some big events because of the way the contracts were written. I’d like to see the arena be used more. There’s people calling all the time wanting to use it.”

Long said under a current agreement, use of the rodeo arena at the fairgrounds is in the hands of the Seward County Fair Association, formed in 2004.

“It was the desire of this commission for that to be used,” Hale said.

Louderback said the rodeo arena could be utilized for as many two to three weeks during summer months.

Long said the contracts stating the fair association’s charge of the rodeo arena were prepared through assistance from county counsel Dan Diepenbrock and were approved by the commission.

“If you’re saying there are issues in those contracts, maybe another work session might need to be done,” Long said to Louderback.

Louderback said his issue with the contracts was that they said the association could use the arena year round, but Lewis had told the fair board it could not use the facility.

“It’s a lot easier to say whatever instead of start fighting with her,” he said. “That was one big issue. When you guys write a contract for us that says we’ve got it, I assume we’ve got it.”

Long said those types of issues need to be brought to the commission's attention.

"That's what I would recommend in the future if something like that does happen and you have an issue with the director or the coordinators," she said. "They can't fix it if they don't know about it."

A discussion to consider the use of an interim director will be put on the commission's agenda for its July 6 meeting.

Diepenbrock said solving the problem at the fairgrounds takes strong leadership.

"It's not just a building that you can rent when somebody calls and wants to come in," he said. "It's got to be managed, and it can be done by someone with just secretarial skills who can answer the phone and make appointments. There's just a myriad of issues that come up in addition to just keeping it maintained. Whether it's two strong leaders or one, it's got to be managed."

Long said after the fair board, which is controlled by the commission, went to a fair association, there seemed to be a separation between the two boards.

"The fair association was supposed to get as much membership as you can with the hopes of getting on your own feet," she said. "It didn't happen, but there was a separation when it became a fair association and not controlled by the Seward County Board of Commissioners."

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