

By JESSICA CRAWFORD • Daily Leader

Several questions have recently come up regarding expenditures on USD No. 480 credit cards. With travel and meals bringing up questions in the minds of many throughout the community, USD 480 Finance Director Jerry Clay explained why some charges were made and exactly what they went to. However, concerned citizen Steve Helm is not convinced that the charges were at all necessary.

In February of this year, a meal was charged to Assistant Superintendent Lance Stout's credit card for \$103. Helm claimed the charge was made to Keg Lodo, a premier upscale steak house in Denver, Colo.

"A friend went out with the Stouts, and basically, his portion of the bill, when you figure it up, the \$25 covered his meal and the taxes,"

Clay said. "The problem becomes, with Mr. Steve Helm, is the average of \$39 per meal is outrageous, and that is his complaint."

Helm also expressed concern over a meal charged at Trulucks Seafood in Houston, Texas, in July of 2008. According to Clay, the \$428 bill covered the meal, gratuity and taxes for 10 people.

"When you go into a restaurant with 10 people, you get hit 15 to 20 percent gratuity, automatically," Clay said. "Part of that is tip."

Ruths Chris Steak House in San Antonio was attended by two employees from USD 480 and

\$148 charged to a district credit card. The two math teachers were attending an AP conference.

"They didn't pay anything back," Clay said. "What they did, it was a four day trip, they left on one day, out at the conference for two days and returned on the fourth day. They charged three meals to USD 480, total. So the meal going out, they paid for on their own. Their breakfast and lunch they paid for on their own, each of those days.

They charged three meals.

"So if you take three meals, add it together, divide it out over four days, their thought process was, 'We didn't charge the district for breakfast, we didn't charge the district for lunch, we ate at a higher priced restaurant,'" he explained. "Perception makes it look like they spent a \$148 for two people, that is outrageous. They spent approximately \$300, but had they had a per diem, they would have had more money to spend then they did. That one meal by itself is high, no argument about it. But over the trip, it is not high."

Helm claimed that during the Sept. 8 school board meeting, hotel rooms totalling \$26,371 was approved by the board as an expense.

According to Clay, 55 employees were attending conferences in the Dallas area and all charges included conference fees as well, due to the fact that the conferences were conducted in the respective hotels. Helm does not feel that it is appropriate to stay in such a high priced hotel.

"The problem that you get on the \$26,000, there were 11 different conferences that were charged to the credit cards. The most expensive was the AVID, a week long trip, \$18,000 for 23 or 24 that went for a week," Clay said. "When you go through the whole deal, there was 55 staff that went to these 11 different trainings. So if you take the total amount divided by 55, you average \$524 per person to in-service somebody.

"It was done over the summer so they wouldn't miss school," he continued. "The other point that was not brought up there, those 24 teachers that went, went on their own without any additional pay. If you are asking somebody to go and not paying them to go, they are doing it freewill, do

you put them in the Motel 6 or in the nicer hotel?"

According to records, Helm noticed during this trip to Dallas, an additional charge was made to the district credit card for \$2,495 for meals and entertainment, \$350 of this was for an attraction known as Medieval Times.

"Of the 24 people who went to the conference, 14 of them decided one evening to go to the Medieval Times," Clay said. "The cost of the ticket was \$56.95 per person. That is for your meal and your entertainment, plus tax. They charged the school district \$25, they paid the other \$31.95 and tax to get in there. Again, yes it was an entertainment deal but the district did not pay 100 percent of the cost."

Helm claimed the lowest cost of each room in Dallas was listed at \$219. However, according to Clay, a special rate was given to all who attended conferences in the hotel, that rate was discounted to \$170.

Another complaint Helm has is the fact that a conference was attended by several administrators in Las Vegas. He felt it odd that the district would need to do anything in Las Vegas. Although, according to one of the attendees, Alan Haskell, Las Vegas was the site of a National Homeland Security Conference attended by himself, Vernon Welch, Lance Stout and Keith Adams. According to Haskell, the conference would have been attended regardless of the location.

"It was a National Security Conference," Haskell said. "They had government keynote speakers that dealt with government, business and schools at all levels. It covered a broad range, there were general sessions, breakout sessions with different topics.

"I am on the Crisis Manual Team, and I have gone to one at a state level in Emporia a couple years ago, I went to a regional one in Dodge City and it all deals with doing what you can to make the school as safe as possible," he added. "The only thing on the credit card was hotel, meals and transportation. There was a school in San Antonio that hired their own police department. We learned a lot from them."

Two specific charges made on the credit card to a Harley Davidson dealership and the Mall of America in Minnesota also made Helm dig a little deeper. Although Clay stated the charges were minimal and again, on the up and up.

“We had two staff members that went to a conference in Topeka,” Clay said. “In Topeka at the Harley Davidson dealership, there is a museum and a small bar and grille in it. They went down there to the free museum and ordered lunch. It was \$16.39 total, for both meals – tax, tip and everything.

“We had two employees that were recruiting (in Minnesota),” he continued. “They had driven up there and wanted to go to the Mall of America. They got on the trolley and didn’t have cash on them to pay for the tickets so they charged it to the credit card. It was \$3 a person. When they came back it was personally reimbursed back to the school district because we do not pay for evening activities. It was their choice to go and was not school business. Those two employees personally reimbursed the school district back the \$6.”

At the Oct. 5 school board meeting a travel policy was on the agenda but was tabled so it could be gone over further. According to Clay, a per diem will likely be added to the policy.

“That travel policy, if it gets passed, or when one gets passed, it will probably have a per diem amount per day – saying you can spend X amount of dollars per meal, per day,” he said.

In several letters to the editor to The Leader, Helm has expressed his concern for such “extravagant” spending by school board members and administrators.

“The school board has stated that ‘it’s all about the children’

getting the proper education they need,” he noted. “I, as well as fellow residents of USD 480 also want the children of USD 480 to get the proper education. The difference is that the USD 480 property taxpayers want the USD 480 school board and administration to spend their tax monies prudently. USD 480 property taxpayers want and expect honesty, trustworthiness and integrity in all the decisions made by the USD 480 school board and administration.

"I have been contacted by a number of parents and students regarding the costly and extravagant travels of the USD 480 administration and some of the board members," he added. "These parents and students have relayed the various ways USD 480 students are expected to travel."

During conversations with students and parents, Helm felt the following statements needed to be relayed.

"The students/parents stated they would love to stay in a Super 8 (apparently, they usually don't get to stay in something that nice),"

he noted. "So, let's cap the hotel charge at \$70 per room per night for the USD 480 administration and school board.

"The students/parents stated they normally have four to five persons per room," he continued. "So, let's require the USD 480 administration and school board to at least double up in their rooms.

"The students/parents stated that, if there is a meal provided, the limit is usually \$5," he added. "So let's cap the meal reimbursement at \$5 per meal for the USD 480 administration and school board."

"Let's implement a common sense travel policy that will be strictly enforced for many years and genuinely puts the children/students first," Helm stated. "Get plenty of input from parents and teachers, most seem to travel frugally. In today's tough economic times, we must spend taxpayer money wisely, travel like you are spending your own personal money with no reimbursement of expenses."

