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By KEELEY MOREE

• Leader & Times Larry Koochel first made his way to Liberal 50 years ago. Fresh out of college, Koochel put his degree to use as an auto mechanics instructor for Liberal High School in 1963. A native of rural Albert, Kan., he says he never meant to spend more than a few years in Southwest Kansas before moving on elsewhere. That, of course, was 50 years ago. The current city commissioner has now lived through decades of change in Liberal – many of which were under his watch as a public servant.

Koochel said his passion for automotive work led to five years as an instructor at LHS, where he met and married his wife, Sandra, in 1966. He then moved on as an instructor at the newly established vocational school.

“I was real fortunate,” Koochel said. “I was one of the first teachers hired so I got to design my own shop and buy all my own equipment. I did that for four years and started (Koochel Automotive) which I’m still operating today.”

With a business, marriage and eventually children to attend to, close friend Dr. Stan Randall was the first person to spark Koochel’s interest in public service as part of the area planning commission, where he found time to serve on-and-off for around 13 years. He also committed time to the vocational school’s advisory board and the board of zoning appeals before landing a role as chairman of a committee to consolidate city and county emergency communication systems.

“The city had an old worn-out console that worked sometimes. The county had basically a fancy CB, so when you called in a fire or called in for some type of emergency, it was relayed a time or two so you never really knew which direction the fire trucks were going,” Koochel said with a laugh. “That took a long time to get that done but it really paid off because we have one of the best combined communication systems in the state.” Koochel pointed to recent figures in the latest State of the City address which show the City of Liberal/Seward County Communications department handled more than 113,160 total calls in 2012 with an average ring time of only four seconds.

“It’

s saved a lot of lives,” he said.

Not long after, Koochel decided to run for his first election to the Liberal City Commission in 1989 where he went on to win two four-year terms. Koochel then took a 10 year hiatus before returning for the 2007 elections.

“If you’re a volunteer for the City on a board, you can serve two consecutive terms and then you’ve got to be off at least a year before you can get back on. I thought, ‘Well, if that applied to volunteers, I figured that I should follow the same thing as a commissioner,’” he said about his absence. “I’m for term-limits.”

Koochel staged a comeback in 2007 after a having a conversation with his friend Don Rash about current city manager Mark Hall.

“One of the reasons I came back was because of Mark Hall,” Koochel explained. “When I was on the commission before, we were going through city managers every two years. You can’t progress as a city doing that because the new city manager comes in and he takes everything the previous manager had put together, throws it in the trash and we start over.”

Since Hall’s transition, Koochel remarked that city operations have drastically improved.

“The city has made lots of changes. The main thing I think is city employees, City Hall and all the departments work together just like clockwork,” he explained. “That never used to be until Mark came along. Mark has a unique way of working with people that brings out the best in them. He’s made me a better commissioner.”

Koochel added that annual State of the city addresses given in recent years have really defined the impact City of Liberal employees make on a regular basis.

“If you’ve seen the State of the City, you realize what’s really done,” he said. “It’s amazing to me as a commissioner of some facts – like 32,000 people have used Parks and Rec in 2012. If I were to have guessed before I knew that, I would have said 2,000 or 3,000. The number of acres they mow, the number of miles the police department puts on cars and the number of arrests and things are all really mind-boggling.”

A shift in the city’s operations is just one change Koochel has watched unfold after his 14 total years as a commissioner and four years as mayor.

“I think when I was first elected in 1989, one of the first things that was discussed was building a swimming pool. We went over as a commission and looked at the pool and how antiquated it was. It hadn’t been maintained the best over the years, the showers were not up to standards, and lots of plumbing didn’t work,” Koochel said. “Right before I got elected in 2007, the commission before had started talking about the swimming pool and were talking about, as I remember, a \$6 million pool. The commission agreed that we needed a new swimming pool, but not at \$6 million. With the sales tax, we were able to build a swimming pool and redo Light Park, which is kind of the diamond of Liberal right now. Other parks have been upgraded, and we’re

building Leete Park on the south end of town which will be really nice.”

Koochel commented that the Adventure Bay Water Park and Light Park renovation projects stand as the city accomplishments he’s most proud to see.

The one-cent sales tax, which passed in 1994, is a revenue tool Koochel has watched evolve over the years as well.

“Fifteenth Street was one of the first big projects, and we had signs put up that it was done with the one-cent sales tax,” he explained. “There’s been a lot of change. Fifteenth used to be a two-lane road with a ditch about 10 feet deep on the side of it so in the wintertime you had to be careful or you would slide off into the drainage ditch.”

Koochel said Western Avenue also came to benefit from the sales tax funds, adding that, “We are really fortunate that we have the one-cent sales tax. Some of the new prospective candidates want to use the money wisely. I can guarantee every bit of it is spent wisely, and if you don’t believe so, go to Mark at City Hall and he can show you.”

While his term as commissioner expires in April, Koochel said he’s interested to see how elected commissioners will move forward with the sales tax initiative and another key focus – economic development.

“Another thing that a lot of candidates have been campaigning on is economic development and they say that Liberal isn’t a friendly town towards business,” Koochel explained. “The reason I think that we don’t have too many new businesses is the community does not all work together. We have too many little groups, and by group, I’m talking two to four people. Every time they want to do something, they come up with a big idea but omit how to fund it and keep it going. When Liberal, Garden and Dodge started the Golden Triangle around 2008, the first thing I noticed right away was that those two communities all worked together. We don’t have that here. When talk about (getting) IHOP started, other businesses started complaining.”

Koochel said he hopes the new commission and community at large will learn to work together just as he has with fellow commissioners over the years.

“The main thing is you’ve got to work together. You should have five commissioners with five different views of things. But you discuss it and you come together and maybe learn that you didn’t know this or that. You visit and come to a consensus and vote on it – but you always vote for what is best for the community,” Koochel stated. “You’ve got to remember who put you there and do what is best. Sometimes there’s maybe a vote of the commission that at first you wonder why they voted that way, but sometimes there’s things that you can’t really bring out right away and down the road, things kind of come to a head.”

Another hope Koochel holds onto is for more involvement within the community.

“The air museum has a dinosaur project going and the robotics program, and that’s a lot of volunteers. People need to volunteer and get involved,” he advised. “It’s easy to complain, but

until you get out and actually volunteer and see what a difference you can make, then there's no need to sit at home on the couch. Get out and try to make your community better. I have people come up who will start complaining, and I'll ask if they voted in the last election. That ends the conversation about 95 percent of the time. You've got to vote, you've got to volunteer, and you've got to have a positive attitude to grow. It's better for everyone."

When asked who his biggest supporters have been over the years, Koochel replied without hesitation, "my wife."

"Saundra has always encouraged me to be involved and supported me when maybe I didn't vote right," he said with a laugh. "If it wouldn't have been for my wife, there are probably a lot of things I wouldn't have done."

"I'm fortunate to have been friends with Don Rash and Bob Carlile," he added. "They did a lot more for the community than probably most people know. On several projects where maybe things weren't going too good, somehow the financing was taken care of – it was those two getting their checkbooks out and never taking credit for it."

In the end, Koochel says his time in Liberal and as a commissioner may never have panned out if it weren't for the friendships he's made over the years.

"When I came here, being a teacher and so forth, you got to know a lot of people. Everybody was so friendly," he explained. "When I was mayor and would give a talk to people out of town, I would always tell them that we have a lot of assets here, but our best asset is our people. I came out here fresh out of college and figured I would be here a couple of years, but I never left. I suppose they'll plant me out here by the golf course someday."

Koochel faces only three more meetings as a commissioner after having attended hundreds during his service. He hopes to spend whatever free time he finds in the future visiting grandkids and spending more time with his wife on his favorite hobby – Corvettes.

"I've always liked cars. I bought my first Corvette in 1971," he said with a smile. "I buy Corvettes, work on them and sell them to keep busy. We buy a lot of them in Dallas and Saundra kind of likes cars, too – everyone knows her by her red Thunderbird. We have a lot of fun with it."

In reflecting on his time serving the City of Liberal, Koochel said he's leaving without regrets and has only positive things to say of his time.

"It's been very enjoyable," he commented, while adding that, "The city will go on without me."

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