

By EARL WATT • Leader & Times Most of the 30,000 cities and towns in the U.S. have economic development staffs calling businesses in an attempt to recruit them.

Liberal is no different.

But like many of the other 30,000, trying to get to talk to the site selecting personnel for a retail company is almost impossible.

One major retailer even hung up on Liberal's economic development people before listening to another appeal from another town asking to speak to the site selector.

One company actually showed some interest after an initial call from Liberal's Melanie Lunceford. But instead of calling Liberal to further the conversation, he called a different kind of company instead.

"You would think if he was intrigued and wanted to respond, he would email us back," Liberal Economic Development Director Jeff Parsons said. "Instead he calls Retail Attractions. He asked if they did business in Liberal. He told them, 'These guys are doing it right,' as far as hunting retailers, but he called Retail Attractions because he has worked with them before."

Retail Attractions then made the call to Liberal on behalf of the client.

"That is how we got hooked up with them," Parsons said. "It is an example of how that business works."

For retail businesses to cut through the "white noise" of economic development staff calling on a continual basis, they work with firms like Retail Attractions to help provide the information they need to find the right locations for expansion.

The retailer will then get a third-party view of a community rather than a sales pitch, and then they can make a decision based on the relationship with the consulting company.

Liberal will eventually show up on the radar of retailers that believe the community fits their specific mold, but it could take a lot longer.

"We recruit retail constantly," Parsons said. "We do it every day. Eventually, we will run across those guys just by the sheer number of calls. But it may take us three years to stumble across that guy who is doing a mall deal, and by then he has moved on. That is the benefit of having Retail Attractions. He has such a wide circle of contacts. He has his finger on the pulse of this entire region. He works with towns our size."

Rickey Hayes started as the Economic Development Director of Owasso, Okla., a small community north of Tulsa.

Many of the inner-city retailers were looking to expand, and Hayes developed a relationship with many of them as well as developers.

He was able to bring more than 4 million square feet of retail to Owasso, but more importantly, he developed the contacts with those companies, as well as others, and branched out to duplicate what he learned in Owasso to other communities.

“It would take us years to make the contacts he already has,” Parsons said. “It’s like putting the process in a microwave. It speeds it up.”

For Retail Attractions to benefit Liberal, Hayes would bring his company in to do a demographic analysis.

With that data, he would be able to cross-reference our data with his list of retailers that would be compatible.

Having Retail Attractions working for Liberal won’t change the data, Parsons said, but it would accelerate the discussions with retailers and help provide a better understanding to some retailers who might not understand Liberal’s market.

“Most retailers count heads, and they look at Liberal as 20,000, 25,000 people and say, ‘That’s not enough,’” Parsons said. “They don’t understand our secondary market has 80,000 people, and we never get a chance to explain that. Retail Attractions has the contacts, and they can make that case. They know who will be putting in 100 locations in the next 18 months. Rickey Hayes knows that person doing the site selection, he can call them, and he’s an independent third party, he has bona fides with them. I am calling them, I don’t have those bona fides, I am trying to get them to Liberal. They may have been lied to by an eco devo director before.”

Retail Attractions has already started to work with Dodge City, Woodward, Okla., and Enid, Okla. If Liberal opts to use the service, the company has agreed to lower its regular fees since travel can be split between Liberal and Dodge City.

The company will charge \$3,500 for a demographic study and \$1,500 per month the first year. After that, Parsons said the company will charge a per-foot fee for companies that decide to move to Liberal after working through the Retail Attractions system.

To cover that cost, Parsons said that growth would only need to expand by one half of 1 percent.

“One good retailer could do that,” he said.

But the results would most likely not happen next week, or even next month.

“This won’t be an overnight process,” Parsons said. “Many of these companies plan 18 months in advance. If we hired them today, we are looking at the third and fourth quarter of 2014.”

But Liberal could be on the radar of the site selectors with companies that right now won't answer a call or return an email.

"It's no guarantee," Parsons said. "He has struggled with some communities, but they were small communities — about 4,000 people. The larger the community, the better his success rate."

Internal data also shows that Liberal is currently short on retail stores.

"We get a report of leakage, people in Liberal and our trade area spending the money outside the trade area," he said. "We have a general idea of where our greatest leakages are. They are the easiest and fruitful outcomes to our recruiting activity. We know where to target. I think we are under-retailed."

That data is important to potential stores who need data to discover how they would fit in Liberal.

Other indicators show that Liberal is poised for significant growth.

"If you look at Liberal, we are coiled up, ready to leap forward," Parsons said. "We have low unemployment, a housing crunch, schools that are busting at the seams. We are ready to take that next step. Just look at the number of jobs available now."

According to Parsons, National Beef Packing is short about 150 employees, and another employment source showed an additional 200 openings in Liberal not including the city, county, school district, college or hospital.

"We have probably about 400 jobs, and that means we could grow about 1,200 people, and we need those people right now," Parsons said. "They could go to work tomorrow if we had them here. That is 5 percent growth instantly. It took us 10 years to get that from the last Census."

With that potential, Liberal could be attractive to retail companies, but the economic development department won't be able to share that story with retailers. Retail Attractions can.

And while Retail Attractions works the retail side, Parsons would be able to focus on companies that do take his phone calls, specifically the oil and gas industry.

"We don't only recruit retail," Parsons said. "Right now, oil and gas exploration is heating up. That allows me to go out and talk to more of those people and talk to those companies about coming to Liberal. That's where you need both sides of the coin, people to come to town to spend money at the retailer and higher paying industrial jobs. Retail jobs, unless you are an owner or manager, are good jobs, but they aren't high paying jobs. We want manufacturing to complement that."

Those companies are more receptive to talk to economic development directors from towns like Liberal, and Parsons can focus more of his time talking to decision makers rather than fighting

through retail gatekeepers.

Retail Attractions representatives are expected to make a presentation to the Liberal City Commission some time in late April or May, and a decision will be made whether or not to secure their services.