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By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times    Next Tuesday, voters in Liberal will decide who will fill four seats on the city's commission.    Three of the eight candidates are incumbents, but for one incumbent, the following Tuesday will mark the end of his time on the board.

Recently, Larry Koochel made the decision not to seek another term on the city commission, and Tuesday, during the items from commissioners portion of the board's regular meeting, the outgoing commissioner said a final farewell.

Koochel said it has been an honor and pleasure to serve Liberal as a city commissioner. "There are many people I wish to thank for making the past six years extremely meaningful for me," he said. "The list is so long I will save that for another time."

Koochel then said his remarks would instead be focused on what the commission has accomplished, and he also talked about the "unfinished" business to be inherited by the next commission.

"When I was elected six years ago, there was expectation of change, and change there was," he said. "The city was moving in a direction that would prevent expansion and growth. The city had lost its identity."

Koochel said people seldom look back to where Liberal was in 2007, and he believes if they did, it would explain a lot about what is happening now.

"In 2006, the city held the distinction as having the second highest crime rate in the state of Kansas," he said. "We were the first county in the entire state of Kansas to hold the distinction of 51 percent Hispanic. That is not a bad thing, but with that distinction came the remarks that everyone is an illegal alien. We know that is not true."

Koochel said that distinction also earned Liberal the label of a gang town.

"People thought that Liberal was some sort of drug capital," he said. "In 2006, the quality of life was so poor that the Hutchinson News stated in an article about the city, 'When she gets old enough to start walking, where is she going to play? I can't take her to the park. I can't let her play in front of the house – she'll get shot.'"

Koochel then said this is a battle Liberal still faces today.

“I knew the city had to change, and I thank the commissioners today for all that we have done,” he said. “We started with Light Park and the police department. You remember what it was. We moved from park to park and made so many improvements throughout the city. You remember what they were.”

Koochel said the next commission will continue to do this work.

“We started programs to make our city shine,” he said. “You remember what they were. But I am sorry to say so many people can’t remember where the city was in 2006. They can’t understand that every new business that we approach knows our reputation from six short years ago.”

Koochel said the upcoming election has brought out topics that the commission has dealt with for the past six years.

“Economically, we have never passed any ordinances that are anti-business,” he said. “I have heard that said, and you know they can’t name a thing. We have only passed things to improve the business climate. What we have done over the past six years has helped us overcome the question every retail business asks, ‘With 30,000 cities wanting us to move in, why would we choose Liberal? Our research states you have held the distinction of the second highest crime rate in the state of Kansas and you have an illegal alien problem.’”

In those six short years, Koochel said the board has moved far, but naysayers still cannot remember where Liberal was in 2006.

“It is truly sad to think that some members of our Chamber of Commerce still make statements about our city being anti-business, when we support the Chamber and have furnished them a building at little to no charge,” he said. “They can’t remember where we were and where we are today. They refuse to realize all the things we have done for business.”

Koochel then addressed the city’s housing issues, saying the commission has brought on many programs to help those in need and those who wish to build.

“Yes, we are working continuously, but, as we all know, especially from the major employers in this city, the key is rental units,” he said. “Those who think that 200 new homes is the answer when compared to 400 rental units are mistaken. When asked, a realtor will honestly tell you that both are needed, but rental housing is a priority.”

Koochel said the commission’s responsibility is public service, yet housing has also been given to the board as an additional responsibility.

“We are very aware of things that have been said during this election that the city cannot legally do or cannot afford,” he said.

Next, Koochel addressed the city’s police department, again recalling where Liberal was in 2006.

“I remember when our citizens were afraid,” he said. “I know that the chief has done great things and has changed the work ethic of the police department that once held the second highest crime rate in the state of Kansas. I am proud of what the chief has done, and I can only say that people refuse to remember where we were and what the police department had to do.”

In closing, Koochel expressed his pride for Liberal.

“I am proud of this city,” he said. “I am proud to be a city commissioner and will always be proud of serving Liberal. I have only one regret, and that is some citizens refuse to remember where we once were and how far we have come in such a short time. Again, I feel truly honored and grateful to have served as a city commissioner. To quote one of my favorite entertainers, ‘Thanks for the memories.’”

Following the speech, Koochel’s fellow commissioners and the audience in attendance gave the outgoing commissioner a standing ovation.

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