

By EARL WATT • Leader & Times When Nick Hatcher ran for the USD No. 480 School Board, he ended tied for the final spot with Cliff Abbott. A coin flip put Hatcher on the board.

No coin flips were needed after Tuesday night's election.

Hatcher won a narrow victory, but this time it was at the top of the list of candidates.

He was followed by Matt Friederich, who was only four votes away, and Crystal Clemens, who was only eight votes away from Hatcher. For Clemens, it was her third attempt at earning a spot on the school board, and it took encouragement from the community to try a third time.

"It was definitely encouragement of others to try again," Clemens said. "I contemplated not running, but it was the encouragement and support that made me run again."

Hatcher has been a leading advocate for the enhancement of the schools' facilities, and he said he would need to go to work to provide the community with the information they need so that the overcrowding issue can be addressed.

"My vision and responsibility is to present the community with the facts of the district," he said. "The facts tell me we have two junior highs and several grade schools that are inefficient. They don't have enough class rooms. It won't be me making the decision to move forward to expand, it will be made by the board to present those facts to the community and the community will have to decide what is in the best interest for the district. Sometimes people forget that. Seven members of the board do not have the power to start a school bond project. That is the community's decision."

Over the past few years, the board has been perceived as divisive, but with two new members

joining the board along with three that are in the second year of four-year terms, Hatcher believed there was hope for the various views to find areas where they can be unified.

“I hope, as a board, we can come together, realize what the facts are, and present that to the community and present what I have seen for the past four years,” he said. “Hopefully, we will bring it back to the community. I will work diligently to inform the community of what we have, the conditions we have, and how that will affect our district and our children and show them that Liberal is growing, and we have some real issues with our schools.”

Friederich believed that not only would there be an effort to be unity on the school board but also with other elected officials so that common issues can be addressed across all local units of government.

“I want to work with other entities — county and city — to resolve our challenges, housing and the rest, so it is positive for all entities,” he said. “What I see is people want to see change in the community and district. I want to be smart. I want to be effective. I was in favor of a number of needs, but I know it comes with expense. I want to be effective, but I also know we don’t have unlimited funds.”

Friederich and Clemens were both Liberal High School graduates in 1994, and both said they felt comfortable not only working with each other but the other members of the board.

The new board members will not take office until June.