

Consulting firm to cost \$21,500, 1-year contract for now

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times The City of Liberal took a huge step forward Monday in bringing more retail to the community. City commissioners voted unanimously to hire Retail Attractions, a consulting firm based out of Owasso, Okla., to aid in efforts to grow Liberal's business community.

The vote came after a presentation by Retail Attractions' Rickey Hayes, and before the presentation, Liberal Economic Development Director Jeff Parsons gave a few remarks about Hayes' work in the city. "A big part of what we do is to assist in the growth of our business community, our retail community," Parsons said. "A retail community provides a lot of things. It provides quality of life. It provides jobs. It also provides revenue for the city in the form of the 1-cent sales tax. In order to improve the effectiveness and the efficiency of our recruiting efforts, we'd like you to consider hiring Retail Attractions." Parsons said the consulting firm "connects retail companies with communities."

"Our process in economic development will continue," he said. "We won't stop recruiting retail just because we've hired Rickey. We also will continue to recruit commercial and industrial manufacturing companies."

Parsons said Retail Attractions is a marketing arm like none Liberal has had before, and he then reviewed what the financial impact would be for hiring the company.

"The cost of hiring Retail Attractions is a one-time fee of \$3,500 for market analysis and \$1,500 per month for 12 months as a fee that allows them to do what they do," he said. "After a period of a year, we can sit down, negotiate terms, analyze what we've done in the first 12 months. If we want to go forward, we'll talk to them about going forward."

Economically, Parsons said things are beginning to fall into place in Liberal.

"We've got growth," he said. "We're looking at expansion of our housing market. Industrial wise, we basically are out of space. Business is good in Liberal. We are ready for some growth in the retail market."

Hayes presented the commission with data about Liberal, and he said every city budget has sales tax revenue as its building block.

"In Oklahoma, cities live and die by sales tax because their general fund is funded solely by sales tax," he said. "There's no ad valorem taxes."

Hayes said the foundational structure of his company is “helping cities capture at least some of the revenue they’re losing to markets around them.”

The consultant said cities with high paying jobs have a person looking at what goods and services are available to employees in terms of retail should a company locate to that community.

“Our job is to create enough dynamic about your market that we can get your market to stick out of the pack enough to let somebody in some cubicle in Minneapolis say, ‘We need to look at this market right here,’” he said.

Hayes said he has worked with communities where landowners were not willing to sell land, and he said this can create issues for potential business in a city.

“When that happens or if the price is skewed because of one thing or another, sometimes public entities have to control at least a portion of developable real estate before it’s actually in play,” he said.

Hayes’ company has worked for more than 125 cities in the U.S., and he said increasing that number will have more retailers looking at Liberal.

“I just think if the town continues to be progressive, you’re going to get some of the growth,” he said.

Commissioner Joe Denoyer, who made the motion to contract with Retail Attractions, said along with business, another problem needs to be addressed.

“As a commissioner, I believe we also need to be aggressive in the housing market,” he said. “I would make a motion that we move the city forward and enter into a contract with Retail Attractions.”

Hayes stated very simply that his company will work to make Liberal as desirable to retailers as possible.

“We give them data, and we want to take them to the most dynamic market,” he said. “We want them to know when we suggest a community to them, when they do their research, it shows the same thing we said it was going to show.”

Before the vote, Denoyer said he was excited for the move the commission was about to make.

“If we approve this here, the work just starts,” he said. “The work is just getting started. It’s going to take all of us pulling together to make this happen. We’re just putting one more piece of the puzzle into place. Let’s roll up our sleeves and get to work.”