

Is Liberal willing to do the same?

By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

When Liberal opted to secure the services of Retail Attractions earlier this year, Economic Development Director Jeff Parsons said that growth would not be an overnight process.

Liberal may be late in getting in the retail game, and it could take years to see the outcomes, but 60 miles north of Liberal, Garden City has been committed to retail growth for almost two decades, and the cornucopia of retail businesses is running over.

Earlier this week, John Collett, president of Collett & Associates who has been spearheading development in Garden City, announced four new stores that will be expanding into Garden City with more expected to come.

The four stores are a part of a \$24.6 million building project that will also include up to 10 additional restaurants and other retail stores. Construction is expected to begin in October on the four stores that have committed.



The four new stores are Ross Dress for Less, Dick's Sporting Goods, Cato Fashions and Ulta Cosmetics.

The lease agreements on the stores range from 10 to 15 years.

"That's a pretty nice critical mass shopping center. It's a destination," Collett said in a recent article in the Garden City Telegram. "This is an exciting project to us, and I think it's going to be a really great addition to your town."

One of the differences in Garden City is how other businesses perceive the growth than they do in Liberal.

While the new stores will be located far from the downtown shopping district, Beverly Schmitz Glass, the executive director of Downtown Vision said a larger draw to Garden City will benefit the entire community.

"Our job is to make sure they come downtown before they go home," Glass told the Telegram. "It's a great addition. It brings more people to town, which is exactly what we want. Everybody wins on this, and I don't think downtown will be any different. We just have to bring our 'A' game."

In Liberal, new business ventures have been resisted by some existing businesses.

When IHOP was in discussions with the city of Liberal, some viewed the expansion as competition to their own business. Some made open statements to the Liberal City Commission urging them not to use incentives to help attract additional businesses.

But in Garden City, public and private ventures are commonplace. The new Menards along with

the additional businesses in the current expansion received approval as a tax increment financing district. About \$9.2 million of the expansion project will be paid through TIF.

Former City Commissioner Larry Koochel pointed out how difficult growth was in Liberal because of the lack of cooperation when he chose not to seek another term.

“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 said earlier this year. “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.”

But Garden City was issuing temporary notes so that construction could begin in October. By using the TIF revenues generated by the project over the next 20 years, the debt will be serviced, and the community will continue to experience robust growth and more expansion.

The Liberal City Commission also voted to approve a commercial investment district on the north side of Liberal, but critics said the plan allowed an unfair advantage to new businesses by allowing them access to public funding, something that was not available when existing businesses funded their own construction.

The desire for growth has been stunted by the opposition while other businesses in Garden City have embraced expansion as a way to attract new shoppers to the town.

While Retail Attractions may help Liberal locate businesses looking to expand, it will still be up to the Liberal City Commission whether or not to create the atmosphere that allows for blended financing that has been working 60 miles away.