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Partnership with USD 480 up for commission approval

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Robotics for kids has become a popular pastime in Liberal and Seward County over the past two years. Now, if a partnership between the city-owned Mid America Air Museum and USD No. 480 solidifies, the trend may gain a foothold in Liberal schools.

MAAM director Jim Bert will appear at Tuesday's Liberal City Commission meeting to seek approval of program designed to capitalize on the local enthusiasm for robotics. At its last board meeting in July, the school board gave the proposal a nod, pending support by the city. The approved memo outlined details of a fledgling robotics program to be established through elementary, intermediate and middle schools.

Bert said the idea grew out of a 1,000-teacher, 100-mile radius survey he conducted, asking teachers about their interest in robotics programs designed to coordinate with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) education.

"Overwhelmingly, what I heard was that they would love to implement something like this in their classrooms, but they didn't have the space, and they didn't have the funds," said Bert. Over the

next year, he was able to provide help to some area schools, using private grants and donations. But he's concerned that while Tyrone, Okla., Walsh, Colo., and Ulysses have been able to benefit from MAAM's programs, Liberal schools have not.

That's why he approached USD 480 to ask about a partnership that would focus on recreational activities that make science fun and cool.

"Robotics is ideally suited for informal learning activities, kind of a hands-on, minds-on thing," he said, "and since the mission of the museum is to serve the community — which in terms of economic development and influence, ends up being a 100-mile radius — we want to be sure that we serve Liberal, too."

According to the memo, MAAM would provide each of Liberal's seven elementary schools a Junior First LEGO League base kit and team registration. The materials would allow students to begin exploration of LEGO robotics programs, which combine the familiar children's construction toy with beginning computer programming and science/technology concepts. Intermediate and middle schools and Liberal High School would also receive age-appropriate kits, which would enable students at those schools to participate in competitive meets in the state and nation. Students participating in the program would have free access to robotic lab space and computers at MAAM after school and on weekends.

"What we have is still in process," Bert emphasized. "With the school board's approval, it's really only half a document that depends completely on the city commission's approval. I hope to have an answer from them on Tuesday."

The museum isn't just handing out kits and well-wishes, though. MAAM also proposed hosting a robotics expo for students. A stipend of \$2,000 would also be furnished for a teacher to work extra hours as a coach for one of the competitive robotics teams.

If the commission approves it, Bert estimates the total outlay for the program, including materials, staffing and events at around \$20,000.

He's optimistic, because the robotics program itself is the result of community feedback. People in Liberal want more science-connected opportunities for students, he said.

"The story of this program dates back to when I first came here, and George Rosel stopped in and expressed a wish to see the museum and the school district work more closely," Bert recalled. "Former teacher Gary Dearing expressed an interest, Joy Schultz, a NASA employee originally from Liberal said she would be interested in supporting an effort like this ... and over time, this initiative has grown and grown, and now what you see is the fruition of an important project."

Like the school district, MAAM aims to serve children, Bert said.

"We see it as part of our mission to offer recreational activity that has academic value. It's not something that replaces what the school district is charged to do, but it entwines and enhances with the goals they have," he said. "There are increasing pressures in society that educators get more focussed on STEM material, and like the district, MAAM wants the best for our kids."

In the long run, Bert said, better STEM education in Liberal means more opportunities for young people, and an incentive for them to return to the community and raise their own families here.

Bert will appear at Tuesday's Liberal City Commission meeting to present his proposal.

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