

- Daily Leader staff report

In an article published by the Southwest Times, a three-day per week periodical in Liberal, the accusation has been made that Earl Watt and five other employees of the High Plains Daily Leader are being sued by the Times.

As of this morning, no such notification has been received by Watt or the Leader.

But the move did not come as a surprise to the staff at the Leader.

“This appears to be a final attempt of a desperate organization to try to remove their competitor,” Watt said. “They could not do it through open competition, so they are attempting to intimidate with a frivolous lawsuit.”

Allegations made by Times representative Michael Schuver state that Watt and the 16 employees who left the Times did so with a covert plan to “destroy a 121-year-old newspaper in Liberal.”

“What’s really sad about the Lancasters’ and their management is it was them that destroyed a 121-year-old company,” Daily Leader managing editor Larry Phillips said. “When they decided they had to have more profit out of the Times’ operations – to send back to Alabama – they thought they could drop Associated Press services, which are expensive, drop all comics, all special features, like Annie’s Mailbox, and days of publication, staff reductions — anything that cost them a dime to provide to the readers. They have never cared about the citizens in this area. It has always been about squeezing every dime out of this community.”

Watt was an employee of the Times for 17 years, the last nine for Lancaster Management who purchased the Times in March 1999.

Since that time, Schuver directed Watt to make changes that consistently led to a less appealing product to the subscribers including the elimination of the television guide and removal of daily carrier delivery service in many outlying areas. Despite a healthy operating performance margin, Schuver demanded more, stating that the company could not meet its financial obligations without an operating performance, or profit, of \$60,000 per month above expenses from Liberal Publishing Company, LLC. The funds were needed to service the near \$7 million debt of Liberal Publishing Co., LLC.

Watt's research showed that daily news service could be provided with substantially less debt and a smaller investment.

Schuver, in November of 2007, told Watt that he would have to take the paper to two times per week and still keep all the revenue while cutting readers' services.

Watt talked Schuver into at least going three days per week.

"I knew that there would be no way to keep every dime in revenue while removing all of the services that the community expects from its paper," Watt said. "Did going to three days a week do harm or was it us leaving? It's obvious it was their decision to cut back services that hurt the Times. And now, Schuver is trying to shift the blame from his decisions to us."

But Watt complied with Schuver's demands and made the cuts, including staff reductions and the elimination of news services.

Each morning, including the day Watt later resigned from the Times, Watt went on local television station KLKT-TV and did his job of promoting the Times and encouraging subscriptions.

"Publicly, I represented the Times up until my last day the same way I always did," Watt said. "We continued to work hard to meet our goals up and through April. But the environment created by Schuver's cuts had turned the community against us. Several business and community leaders called me and came to my office asking what can be done to return to a

daily newspaper. When I pointed these out to Schuver, he said the days of a daily newspaper in Liberal were over.

I had researched the possibility of meeting that need and purchased equipment and software in case the community rejected the cutbacks.

The community did, and I was left with no other option than to give up a decent-paying job to serve the community by providing a daily newspaper. Schuver expected everyone to do just as they were told or, in his terms 'It's a free country. They can work for someone else.'

That's what we chose to do."

Many employees were denied commissions for selling for the Times that chose to work for the Leader. Some cases are still pending with the Kansas Department of Labor, including Leader classified manager Betty DuBois.

"I was unaware of any plans for the Leader until two weeks before we left," DuBois said. "The Lancasters raised all of the classified advertising rates to make up for the days we were losing. That was a big part in my decision to leave so I can give the people what they wanted."

DuBois and many other employees fielded the daily complaints about the decision to shift to three days per week.

When Watt notified Schuver about the overwhelming negative response, Schuver said it would take the community about a year to get used to the reduced services, citing his experience with doing similar cuts in other markets.

Watt resigned and left the Times offices the morning of April 30 by himself. No staff members left with him while Schuver continues to claim there was an organized walkout.

“I find it interesting they have misrepresented this for so long they actually believe it,” Phillips continued. “Take that ‘organized walk- out’ for example. Watt never planned a walk-out. I was just putting the Wednesday edition to bed when the Alabama gang walked in my office. They asked me what was going on, and I told them Earl was planning on starting a daily. When they asked if I was going with him, I said, ‘Yes.’ I left, leaving a lot of my personal things behind – things that had nothing to do with the Times. And, I never took one thing – not even a paper clip – that belonged to them.

“Some people believe if you tell a lie long enough, people will start believing it,” he continued. “We have always took the high road – not wanting to lower ourselves in that tit-for-tat.”

Watt said that the desperate actions of Schuver to bring a frivolous lawsuit would not distract from the Leader providing daily news to the community, and that Schuver will be held to account for his false allegations.

“A lot of people know I’m a big-time hunter, and if you shoot a black bear, when he runs off into the woods, you can hear him when he dies,” Phillips said. “It’s called the death moan. I think the front page story in the Times today is that moan — a last gasp or attempt to stay in business.

“It’s pretty sad.”