

By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader City commissioners turned down a bid to keep the Daily Leader as the City of Liberal's official newspaper Tuesday.

Commissioner Dave Harrison made a motion to accept the low bid from the Southwest Times, a three-day-a-week Alabama-owned publication, and vice mayor Joe Denoyer seconded the motion. Mayor Tim Long voted along with Denoyer and Harrison to accept that motion, with commissioners Larry Koochel and Bob Carlile voting against.

After the motion was made, a discussion ensued beginning with Harrison, who noted the board, who voted to make the Leader the official paper last year, ignored the low bid, made by the Times, during that vote.

"This year, the Times has the low bid again," he said. "I'm not saying we always take the low bid because we don't."

Harrison added there are reasons for not taking the low bid.

"The point is they're not comparable products," he said. "Another is in the case of contractors, for instance, one may not be capable of doing the quality of work that we need."

Harrison said while there are reasons for ignoring the low bid, when comparing the two papers, the decision came down to the lowest bidder.

The bid package for the Times included a \$2.25 per column inch price tag for legal notices, while the Leader's price was \$2.90 for the same item.

At Tuesday's meeting, Times Publisher James Gutzmer said his paper's bid was based on an eightcolumn format, saying the move had been made from six columns two weeks ago. As of last Friday, however, the Times still had a six column format in that day's edition, the date the bids were made public. Sunday, the Times switched to match the Daily Leader's format.

Carlile disagreed with Harrison, saying having a daily makes the Leader the low bidder.

"I don't think that's comparable at all," he said.

Denoyer, who also voted against the Leader last year, said his position has not changed.

"I believe both newspapers have met the requirements put forth by the city," he said. "I feel we've got two great newspapers here. I think the integrity of the bidding process has to remain in tact. You put out a bid for a reason – to solicit and take the low bid."

Long, who voted for the Leader in 2009, said deciding which paper should be the official paper is one of the toughest determinations he has had to make as a commissioner.

“We have two great viable papers,” he said. “Competing in this bid, we have two very well-managed papers. They put out quality work, but I feel in the end, we have to remember what we’re here to do as a city commission and a government is not to get involved in the politics of a community and how they feel about one paper or another.”

Long said a decision on the issue is not one that is taken lightly.

“It involves people – everybody at both newspapers,” he said. “It is a very hard decision. It truly is. There is no good answer to this. Both papers deserve to do this, but unfortunately, taxpayers don’t want to pay twice for advertising legals. It is our job, and we are elected to make those hard decisions. It is a very tough decision, one that’s weighed on me for three days very heavily.”

Koochel said there are two major differences in the two publications, saying the Leader has the advantage of being local and daily.

“I think a daily is a big thing for the community, especially for the city and the court system having to figure out when they’re going to run certain things,” he said. “I just think when you have a paper that is not daily, it just lowers the standard of the community.”

Koochel said having a daily paper as the official paper gives more meaning to the city and the community.

Harrison said the commission is charged with fulfilling a state statute, and both papers qualify to be the official paper.

“It doesn’t have any requirement that it is a daily newspaper,” he said.

Harrison also disagreed with Koochel saying both papers are local. Carlile pointed out the Times is owned by an Alabama corporation. Harrison said this makes little, if any, difference.

“Their employees are here,” he said. “Their building is here. Their business is here.”

Leader Publisher Earl Watt said investments made by the paper go back into the community.

“Every dime that comes through us is reinvested in this community,” he said.

Watt said the Leader had the lowest bid, noting that with a six-column format, the Times bid would have come in at \$3 per column inch.

“We’re \$2.90 an inch,” he said. “We came down from last year. I hope that we’ve served the community in the year that we’ve had to do it. I do still feel like for what you’re getting with the money you spend through the Daily Leader, it’s still a better value. It goes to providing a community daily news service reinvesting in ourselves.”

Watt, who had served as publisher of the Times prior to starting the Leader in 2008, said before

paying local bills with the Times, he had to send as much as \$60,000 per month out of the community.

“If you consider that local, that’s up to you,” he said. “I had to do that month after month after month for nine years, but I don’t have to do that now. Every penny that comes in, there’s no \$60,000 a month sent outside of Liberal.”

Watt said all of the money made by the Leader goes to paying local salaries and to provide for a local investment.

“It just depends on where you want that money to go on a monthly basis,” he said. “That’s what we do, and that’s why I did this. I made this decision for the City of Liberal. I’ve foregone personal gain so that we could do this and keep a daily paper local.”

Watt said every dime and investment made in the Leader, as well as the people involved in starting the paper, did so for the city and the people of the community.

“I don’t know what else I can do to make personal sacrifice and the sacrifice this staff makes to provide daily news service in this community and to keep it local,” he said. “If you see sending \$60,000 a month out of the community as local, that’s a personal decision. We don’t do that.”