Recent vote to increase transient tax will be used to help promote Liberal, fund events

By EARL WATT • Daily Leader

Liberal may be able to become more attractive to tourists after the Liberal City Commission recently voted to increase the transient tax from 4 percent to 6 percent.

The transient tax is placed on motel rooms and is collected from 17 different locations in the city. Guests who come to Liberal and stay in a room pay the tax.

Liberal has not had an increase in the tax since 1993, and that was a

1 percent increase that was earmarked to fund the Mid-America Air Museum.

Each community can determine this rate, and it varies across the state.

Liberal's current 4 percent rate is the same as Finney County (Garden City), but is less than Dodge City (6 percent), Pratt (7 percent), Great Bend (5 percent) and Hays (5 percent).

The increase will take place July 1.

Currently, the Liberal Convention and Visitors Bureau receives 3 percent of the tax to fund its

operations, which includes two employees.

Tourism director Sally Fuller said the funds were used to promote Liberal at trade shows across the state, as well as providing printed material to booth visitors.

Fuller said she currently was working on a bid to bring the Kansas Sampler Festival to Liberal and was hopeful of winning the bid for 2013.

“It would bring people and vendors from across the state,” she said.

“I hope we can pull visitors from Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. About 8,000 people attend the Kansas Sampler Festival.”

Fuller said that due to the limited size of her staff, her role was to provide support to other groups in town who sought to bring activities to Liberal that would create tourist traffic.

“We try to help with events that bring people more than a day,”

Fuller said. “We don’t necessarily want people coming from Dodge City, because they won’t stay the night. We want people from Wichita or Kansas City. That’s why I promote Liberal in Midwest Living and Triple A. We also promote pheasant hunting in two or three magazines.

Hunting is big and fills our motels. We also sponsor the longest tail feather contest.”

Fuller said upcoming events like the Yellow Brick Road Car Show and the Country Music Jamboree will receive some funds from her department to help with their events, and she encourages any other local groups or organizations to bring their ideas to the tourism board for consideration for funding.

In Dodge City, however, where they have had a 6 percent transient tax since 1991, their visitor's bureau consists of four employees and a larger role in the community's activities.

According to assistant director Sandy Masden, there's always some activity happening in Dodge City which was recently named one of the top 20 places to live in the West.

In addition to attending trade shows and advertising in magazines, Masden said Dodge City was able to partner with the state on national television ad campaigns.

Dodge City uses its funds from the transient tax to help fund Dodge City Days, as well as an annual rodeo.

Dodge City is sponsoring a Santa Fe Trail Horse Race Endurance Ride from Santa Fe N.M., to Independence, the same test course in the 1800s that determined if an applicant could work for the Pony Express.

Dodge City's Convention and Visitor's Bureau also owns a trolly and provides tours of Dodge City.

"All of these help bring other conventions to Dodge City," Masden said.

While hotel owners are not really behind the increase of the tax, Masden said they saw it as a "necessary evil."

"They know that these events bring people to town and fills up their motels," she said.

In 2008, Dodge City collected $548,302 from the transient tax from 15 motels at the 6 percent rate.

In the same time period, Liberal collected $280,565. Of that, the state retained 2 percent for administrative costs and returned the cash to the cities where they were collected.

The increase should bring close to $150,000 to help Liberal attract more tourism.

While Fuller did not want to state an opinion on whether she was for or against the increase, she did say that more dollars will help.

“The more money you have, the more you can promote,” she said. “If you don’t tell people what you have to offer, they aren’t coming.”