

By JESSICA CRAWFORD • Daily Leader

Jay Bhakta, owner of Quality Inn, and his fellow hotel owners in Liberal put a stop to the scheduled raise of the transient tax by presenting a petition to the city commission – at least for now.

According to Bhakta, 179 signatures were required on the petition to stop the raise of the tax, but he turned in 238 signatures of registered voters.

Bhakta and his wife, Rina, purchased what is now the Quality Inn, formerly the Gateway Inn, approximately one year ago. After living in Florida for quite a while, they decided Liberal would be a much better place to raise their family and still be a part of the business they have come to love – the hotel business.

Bhakta, along with 16 other hotel owners throughout the community have recently banded together in order to put a halt to the 2 percent raise of the transient tax. Their main reason being bad timing due to the declining economy. The transient tax is already 4 percent, however, the city commission had passed an ordinance raising it to 6 percent that was supposed to go into effect this spring.

“The reason for this is, when they decided to raise it, basically first of all this is a bad time to raise any kind of taxes,” Bhakta explained. “Ten out of 10 of my customers will not pay this kind of tax. I have not asked everybody, some of my regular customers who come here, snowbirds and stuff like that, they have been simply saying that if they stay here for three days, they will be paying \$10 to \$15 more tax, so they can go on to Guymon at 9.95 percent taxes and stay there.

“Here it is 11.95 percent,” he continued. “If the tax goes into effect, we will have a tax of 13.95 percent, which is way too high.

So, basically, business has been declining – that is one thing. And this is not an ideal time to raise taxes. When they stay in my hotel, they go out to eat and they fill their gas tank up when they travel.

So if they don't stay in my hotel or any other hotel in town, the restaurants will suffer and the gas stations will suffer. So just because of this two percent tax, three businesses can suffer."

Bhakta, himself, is a member of the Convention and Tourism board. Due to his seat on the board, he feels he has been able to see first hand how the board is operating and he is simply not pleased with what he is seeing.

"Basically I am there to be a voice of the hotel owners on the board," he said. "We have to make some changes. They have money left over from the last two years so they have decided to try this grant program – just give it away.

"Let's save this money and let it sit there for one more year," he added. "I don't know how they have been running the board for the last few years, but the way I feel is they need to rethink this."

Bhakta would like to see a cap on how high the tax can be raised throughout the years. He gives his former home of Florida as a prime example.

"Florida has a cap of 5 percent," he said. "Nobody can raise the bed tax more than 5 percent. This state has no cap, so we have to work with legislation."

Put quite simply, Bhakta feels that if the tourism board would diligently seek out conventions and activities that would fill their hotels, they would not mind the 2 percent raise in the transient tax.

However, Bhakta does not feel the tourism board is doing their job to fill their hotel rooms.

“So far as I know, the two ladies that sit there on our board and our payroll on the tourism board only attend two conventions a year in Kansas City and Topeka,” Bhakta said. “They are simply not doing what they are supposed to do. They have not made a single effort in the last 20 years to come visit any hotel owners to ask how they can improve our business. That is their job.”

Many have been misled by statements Bhakta has made on his own behalf and on behalf of his colleagues. What many throughout the community may not understand is that Bhakta and his fellow hotel owners are not necessarily opposed to the transient tax in and of itself, they are opposed to a lack of planning, in their opinion, by the Tourism and Convention Board.

“If they had a plan of action of how they would fill our hotel rooms,” he said very matter-of-factly. “We would not oppose this tax.

We would agree to it because it would be filling our rooms.”

“I am here to promote activities that will fill our hotels only,” he said. “Bringing music concerts, stuff like that, if I sell 10 rooms – I will be happy.

“The Gas Compression Institute is all we have,” he added. “There are no sports activities, we need some tournaments. I have not seen anyone making any effort from the city or the tourism board and that makes me worry – raising tax is not the solution when there is already a surplus of funds.”

Bhakta does not think Sally Fuller’s grant program is a good idea. He believes the \$30,000 surplus should be used for promoting advertising for events that will fill hotels – activities that the tourism board seeks out, not activities that come to the tourism board.

“Technically, if you see the budgeting of the tourism board, there is surplus in it, there is 19

percent surplus,” he explained. “There is money that they are just giving away. It is like they decided there is money left over so let’s just use it.

“This year, it is \$30,000 that the director has decided to use for grants,” he explained.

“For example, we are promoting a car show, neither the hotel next door or I had a single customer from last year’s car show. And we still gave them \$2,000 this year, which is fine. They said they will bring this new car and all that, so I said let’s give it a try.”

Bhakta is concerned that the city, tourism board and the hotel owners must come together and communicate. He truly believes communication is the key to resolving this issue to the point where all involved can live with the final decision.

“None of the hotel owners were contacted in terms of this tax raise.

Even the ones that have been here in town for more than 35 years,” he said. “But if we can just sit down and discuss this and come together, I think we can work it out. We all love this city.”

The issue is far from being over. The next step is for Bhakta and his fellow hotel owners to meet with the city commission and the Tourism and Convention Board in order to reach some kind of an agreement.

Bhakta feels such a meeting just might bring the hotel owners, city commission and the Tourism and Convention Board together to reach an agreement.

“Everyone needs to do their part for this all to work. We provide a comfortable place for the visitors to stay, the tourism board and the city need to bring our visitors in,” he concluded. “I am not paying this money out of my pocket, but my hotel guest is. If I don’t have guests, then I won’t be in business – I have to fight for them.”

## Petition halts bed tax increase

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