

By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader

For a project, a recent Leadership Liberal class took on the task of trying to raise funds to help build a community center.

In the time since then, the issue has seemingly been put on the back burner, but Mayor Joe Denoyer brought the question back to the forefront last Thursday with a brief discussion during a joint meeting of the Liberal City Commission and the Seward County Commission.

Most commissioners agreed that bringing a community center to Liberal needs to be a top priority. City commissioner Dave Harrison said one of the reasons one has not been built in the past is that local leaders have an inclination to follow trends rather than set them.

“Liberal and Seward County have had a tendency to be followers instead of leaders,” he said. “I think that’s changed.”

County commissioner Jim Rice said looking at the history of projects the city or the county has tried to do, including the Activity Center in the 1980s and the current swimming pool project, the general public was – for the most part – against the projects until they were completed.

“These two boards have the foresight to look into the future and see what the need is,” Rice said. “Folks are not too willing to follow, but as long as our projects are good and they progress the community, I think we need to look at those kinds of things.”

County commissioner C.J. Wettstein said with most projects the county has done in the last 20 years, officials have educated the public as to what they want to do.

“Once you presented it and gave them the pros and the cons, I think we’ve had fairly good support in the last 20 years,” Wettstein said.

“The key is to have a good plan, give it to them and say, ‘This is what we want. This is what we’re going to do.’ If they agree to it and think it’s a good idea, just make sure that you do what you say you’re going to do.”

Rice said it is important for an item such as this to be funded through a sales tax, which allows everyone to share in the cost of the project, versus a property tax, which leaves a few paying for the entire proposal.

“I think that’s one of the most important, if not the most important, issues that this is a sales tax issue where everybody shares,” he said.

City commissioner Larry Koochel said what would help promote projects more easily is getting more aggressive about economic development.

“Liberal is 20 or 25 years behind the area around us. Everyone has got something going, and I think the citizens of Liberal perceive us as spenders,” Koochel said. “We have done a very poor job of economic development. We have done nothing in the last 15 years.”

Koochel added he gets discouraged when he visits other towns in the area which usually have some kind of new economic development project on the table.

“There’s always a new restaurant, new motel, a new something,” he said. “When you come back to Liberal, we’re just not in the game.

We’re just not doing anything.”

For this reason, Koochel said he believes economic development needs to be a top priority for both commissions.

“We’ve got new businesses coming in,” he said. “We’ve got people moving in. People’s attitudes are going to be different when we want to put in a recreation center or something like this. I think right now, Liberal and Seward County hinges on economic development.”

Koochel said he believes Liberal is not what it is because of what anyone has done, but rather because of its location.

“Our agriculture’s been doing good,” he said. “Our oil and gas have been doing good, but it’s going down.”

Koochel said the first step for both city and county leaders is to take some initiative to develop the local economy.

“There is no community around here that has got the money in the bank, cash on hand, as what we have got, and we’re not doing anything but drawing interest,” he said.

Denoyer said he believes quality of life issues will bring the community center project to a vote of the public.

“I think we need to get off center and come up with a plan, devise a committee made up of both commissions and a rec center director and just start moving forward,” Denoyer said. “The 1-cent sales tax is perfect for that.”

Vice mayor Tim Long said the two commissions are in the best position of any recent boards which have had an opportunity to do as much as they can.

“I think we can either go down as the best commissions that accomplish the most for this community in 30 years, or we can go down in flames as the ones who had everything in hand to do it and accomplished nothing,” Long said. “What we can do as a team of five with the city is one thing, and what you can do as a team of five with the county is one thing, but what we can do as a team of 10 is unlimited.

“I think by reaching across the tables and working together for the best interests of this community and county, I don’t think there is anything we cannot accomplish,” he concluded.