

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

Like most of the country, housing in Liberal is considered one of the biggest drags on the community's economy.

The eight candidates for the race for four seats on the Liberal City Commission addressed solutions to the problem at last week's candidate forum.

Former mayor Ron Warren said fixing local housing shortages starts with single family units.

"Single family housing is actually more of the problem right now," he said.

Warren did talk about multi-family units as well, saying that particular area of housing is a different ball game.

"That financing is done with commercial loans," he said.

Warren said several people in Liberal want to create new units at the present time.

“They’ve actually come to the commission several times wanting to know if we can help it,” he said. “We’re going to have to relook at how we do incentives for multi-family.”

Fellow former mayor Ivanhoe Love Jr. said he has talked with some local realtors and other housing officials, and what he has found is that city officials have put up roadblocks in front of potential builders, including up front costs and credit which are necessary to move forward with construction efforts.

“It’s difficult for a builder to come into our hometown and make a profit,” he said. “That’s because of the cost of the building materials and the labor.”

Love, therefore, said the community needs to work together to figure out how to lower those costs and find a way for builders to turn a profit on newly constructed homes.

“We need to sit down and figure that out and quit worrying about who’s going to make the money,” he said. “What we want to do is create the atmosphere where we can get builders in here and build.”

Candidate Dean Aragon said while he does not have the answers, he is aware of the problem.

“We have an issue with middle class affordable adequate housing,” he said.

Aragon said many potential tenants or buyers make too much money to qualify for some housing projects. He added he would like to educate himself about what can be done, including an opportunity available through the city’s 1-cent sales tax.

“Is there any money there to maybe look at working with a contractor to come in?” he said. “Is there something that’s available as far as a grant? Is there anything out there that’s available that we could use?”

Current mayor Tim Long said housing solutions start with revenue.

“Revenue is always your biggest shortfall that you have, but I think what we have to do is we have to come together as a community to resolve this issue,” he said. That’s local businessmen. That’s city fathers. That’s realtors, developers, the whole gambit of what’s involved. I believe that rental housing is our issue.”

Long agreed with Aragon, saying many of those who don’t qualify for low income housing are teachers, who likewise cannot buy or are not interested in buying a house.

“How can we as businesses help the developers put this together and them not be at risk of losing everything they’ve got without renters?” Long said.

Vice mayor Joe Denoyer said the city is currently looking at some options, including one that will be looked at during tonight’s city commission meeting.

“One of those is rural housing improvement districts, where the city goes in and designates a parcel of land as an improvement district,” he said. “You work with developers, you work with private business, and you try to get them to guarantee if you build a 200-unit apartment complex, we can guarantee that my company will take 100 of those. A developer will then take a harder look at bringing that to a community. It’s working well in Dodge City.”

Denoyer said other options include three tax programs that are now offered at the state level.

“I’m proposing looking at our incentives programs that we currently offer through the city for developers of single family dwelling units also,” he said. “I think we need to take a look at everything that’s not working.”

Candidate Julio Jimenez suggested starting with streets and infrastructures.

“We divide that expense for 15 years,” he said. “In those 15 years, you increase the tax of that property. You create streets. You can create streets, and you will get developers to build in Liberal at any time.”

Jimenez said when it comes to building houses, the city needs to make money on taxes on the house as well as some from incentives on the money spent on building the street.

“Those are the things we need to start looking at for the betterment of our community and the growth of housing,” he said.

Commissioner Dave Harrison agreed with Jimenez, saying housing solutions start with infrastructure.

“What as a community are you willing to do?” Harrison said. “Are you willing to put in a street and sewer and utilities so some developers can come in and build houses and make property? If you are, you need to make your wishes known. It’s your money. If that’s what you want to do, you need to let people know.”

Candidate Jack Carlile said a community working together can be one of the answers to the issue.

“We need to bring in developers, bankers, lawyers, real estate agents, whatever we need to do,” he said. “Let’s throw it out on the table, see what it’s going to do, and we need to do it quick.”

Candidates were then given a chance to give a rebuttal to any of the previous responses. Warren said incentives need to be used for the people taking risk on housing projects.

“That’s the developer, and that includes the development of lots and development of property,” he said. “That’s not giving the money to the contractor. That’s giving the money to the person that’s going to make the project happen. We can make something happen. There’s people out there willing to do it. We have to create how much we think we need for a unit and stick with it.”

Long said the city does have special incentive programs already in place for developers.

“We need to revisit some of those programs that we have,” he said.

Both Long and Harrison warned of what could happen if a project does not work out for potential developers.

“If you put it in, you’re going to pay for it whether anybody’s going to build a house or not,” Harrison said.