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Officials and commissioners of Seward County, foreground, sit perpendicular to city commissioners and across from members of USD No. 480 Board of Education to discuss jointly how to combine efforts to ease the housing shortage in Liberal. L&T photo/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times The City of Liberal, as well as Seward County, are working to provide solutions to the community's growing housing problems.

City and county officials discussed some of those fixes Tuesday in a joint meeting of the two boards and members from the USD No. 480 Board of Education.

Liberal Housing Director Karen LaFreniere first talked about some of the programs that have been put into place at the city level.

"We have implemented a Rural Housing Incentives District and a special assessment for residential and commercial," she said. "We are working on a neighborhood revitalization district. Our current housing programs are our first-time home buyer program, Paint the Town, Safe at Home, Self Help Housing, senior citizen program with weatherization, exterior enhancement, emergency repairs, home rehabilitation, homeowner education, community development, CDBG and multi-family housing incentive."

LaFreniere said 42 houses have been built in Liberal since 2006 with the Self Help Housing program. She then looked at a recently completed survey of 25 Kansas towns to see which of those had housing and community development departments.

The survey revealed that only five of those cities, Wichita, Pittsburg, Emporia, Topeka and Liberal, had both departments.

"A community development department, there were seven," she said.

LaFreniere said none of the towns had just a housing department, and only a few offered other benefits for sellers and buyers of housing.

“Cities with cash incentives to a developer and contractor were Liberal and Garden City,” she said. “Cities with cash incentives to borrowers who are poor, Wichita, Leavenworth, Prairie Village and Hutchinson. Cities with a Rural Housing Incentives District, Liberal, Garden City and Dodge City.”

City commissioners recently passed a resolution stating Liberal is considering establishing a Rural Housing Incentives District within its city limits, and LaFreniere said the county and the school district will be involved with that as well as neighborhood revitalization.

“The tax increase on the property from either bare land or to an improvement, the improvement will be rebated back,” she said. “On the Rural Housing Incentives District, it will go to the seller. On the neighborhood revitalization, it will go to the homeowner.”

City manager Mark Hall said the city commission will host a more in depth presentation on housing in the “not too distant future.” He added the city currently has someone pursuing a RHID.

“We see that taking off,” he said. “The studies we’ve looked at indicate more of a demand for rental housing. We’ve had discussions with National Beef, and rental housing is the biggest demand.”

Hall said the need for rental and purchased homes may need to be looked at, but he said the former is the focus as of now.

“With the transition and the expectant employees that they would like to have, rental housing is in demand right now,” he said. “The city is working with National Beef to assist in getting more rental housing here in town.”

City commissioner Joe Denoyer said the city has identified six parcels of land that could be used for a RHID, but more could be used for that project.

“We’re not limited to or locked into just those six,” he said.

Denoyer said having the three entities together is a big help to finding housing solutions for the community.

“I think it’s good that we know what’s available when we have developers coming to look to build,” he said. “We all get on that same page. I think that would be beneficial to everybody.”

County commission chairman Ada Linenbroker said the county also has land that could be used for further development.

“There’s no reason for the county to be paying taxes on land where we could put some houses, apartments, duplexes, whatever we can put down there,” she said. “That’s what I’m interested in. We don’t need to make a lot of money off of that property. I would like to at least get our taxes back, but we’re only talking between \$500 and \$1,000 for those lots that are down there. That’s what we have in back taxes. Why not build something on it we need and get that area established down there?”

Linenbroker said the county is more than ready for that land to be used.

“It’s available, and I would love to see something done with it,” she said. “It’s not doing any good setting on our rolls.”

At Monday’s county commission meeting, that board approved the sell of a lot at 722 Ohio, and at Tuesday’s meeting, county administrator April Warden said maps are available to see what property is for sale in the county.

“If there’s any of that property that they’re interested in now, how that works, if it sells for above \$1,000, we can take offers on that land, but we do have to post it in the paper twice and give people the opportunity to bid,” she said. “We have to let them know that an offer has been made.”

Warden explained the process that takes place once a bid is placed on the property to be sold.

“The county commissioners can decide to sell that, and we draw up the quick claim deed and get everything transferred,” she said.

Warden said information pertaining to the properties is available in county offices.

“We have the maps hung up on the walls in the GIS department, the treasurer’s department,” she said.

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