

Is It Finally Time to Build?

Adequate Housing a Problem in Rural Kansas

“What can we do to solve this dilemma and open the door of a decent home for folks ready to move in or move back to rural America?”

BY TERRY WOODBURY



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In 2006, a housing development organization called to ask, “How many of your six Public Square Communities have made housing a top priority?” “None,” I replied.

But today’s a different story. Among the 18 Public Square communities—including 49 townshousing is the need I hear most often, specifically, “workforce” housing for modest income people.

Wallace, population 57, has named housing a top goal. Meade County’s three towns—Fowler, Meade and Plains—are working jointly on both senior and single-family housing. Humboldt just built 12 senior units. Greeley County formed an LLC with private investors to address their needs.

So what happened in just six years that reversed the rural housing demand? I observe four almost simultaneous shifts.

► Attitude changed. Some youth who left for the bright lights of the city 40 years ago are looking at things differently today. Many of those baby-boomers would like to “go back home” to amidst the fond memories of their childhood. Plus, some 30-year-olds raising young families in the big city are realizing that safe streets and neighbors who know their child’s name are more nourishing than five fast-food restaurants within 20 blocks.

► Economy changed. The national economic collapse in 2008 hit big cities hardest. The upward-and-onward myth took a hit, the shiny lights dimmed a little, and more than a few families lost one of the incomes they needed to afford the house mortgage and pay down the credit cards. Moving to a more stable rural community, especially if extended family is there, became an appealing option.

► Demographics changed. The 2010 census

made that too obvious to ignore. A new sense of urgency jumped to the fore as newspapers’ front pages declared matter-of-factly: the death of your rural community could happen in your lifetime.

► Politics changed. The Kansas Governor successfully advanced a proposal to partner with rural counties to offer tax breaks and student-loan repayments to people relocating to small towns. But guess what? With few exceptions, no good home is available. For 40 years, no middle-class housing was built, what was there deteriorated, community standards dropped, and junk properties multiplied. Consequently, housing values went so far in the tank that today a three-bedroom home costing \$130,000 to build may be worth only \$80,000 on the market. No builder and no banker can make that equation work.

The \$50,000 question—the approximate financing gap between construction cost and appraised value—is this: what can we do to solve this dilemma and open the door of a decent home for folks ready to move in or move back to rural America?

To answer that, we at Public Square Communities are looking for any good strategy that a community is trying to begin the road to housing recovery. If your community is trying something creative, or daring, or downright ingenious, email our Public Square Colleague, Liz Sosa, at lsosa@buildthesquare.com and share your strategy. Liz will turn these into a future column in hopes that one or more may help your community. With low interest rates and increased demand for rural housing, could it FINALLY be time to build? **KCL**

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