

# American Dream Gone South

## Rural Kansas Needs an Infusion of Quality Housing

BY JEANETTE SIEMENS



Jeanette Siemens

**Across rural Kansas,** we want to grow. No matter the size of community we are short of quality housing for our workers. Some call it “moderate income” housing...for a teacher, feedlot worker, hospital employee, young pastor or convenience store manager.

Why such a universal problem? After decades of population decline, properties were neglected, resulting in lower property values.

New construction for the middle class was eliminated. Higher end homes for those with disposable income and government subsidized units for those at the lower end were the sum total of rural housing development for over 40 years.

It's not a pretty picture: barely-fit rental houses, few if any good apartments, and no possibility of getting a bank loan for a new home when it costs more to build than it's worth in the depressed market. Meanwhile, state and local governments are offering incentives for people to “come home” to rural Kansas. This is not the American Dream we long for!

Fifteen months ago, after nearly every Public Square community named “workforce housing” the top barrier to growth, we decided to hunt for a path through this jungle. We convened a range of major stakeholders in rural communities—employers, entrepreneurs, bankers, utility managers, home builders, policy makers and philanthropists—for a day-long conversation.

Two Public Square communities with the longest track records in addressing workforce housing became “pilot communities,” diagnosing the problem and solution. The stakeholders challenged themselves to explore how the private sector (rather than government) might play the lead role in financing the solutions these communities might recommend. They also recognized they would need to maximize their knowledge by

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uncovering “best practices” in the arena of workforce housing development.

I took on the task of hunting for best practices and uncovered numerous on-the-ground tactics used by a variety of identities. For example, in Grinnell, IA, the chamber of commerce is facilitating a program that speeds up the construction process. Tactics include selecting strategic sites, requiring builders to use 75 percent local materials and subcontractors, and partnering with a bank that simplified the loan process.

As I gathered best practices, our two pilot communities have researched needs of their employers and residents, educated their community on the issue, and are gaining new local partners.

By the time you read this column, our two pilot communities will have presented their recommendations to stakeholders and regardless of the outcome, both communities and the stakeholders will have become co-learners on a difficult, laborious journey.

Next month, you will hear “the rest of the story.” If, in the meantime, you know of a best practice, please let me know. You can email me at [jsiemens@buildthesquare.com](mailto:jsiemens@buildthesquare.com). **KCL**

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