

# Economic development works on housing related issues

By BRANDY LEROUX  
bleroux@nwkansas.com

Norton City/County Economic Development has been working on some of the housing issues facing Norton.

"We don't have adequate quality housing," said Diane Becker, director of economic development. "That's one of the obstacles to bringing in more people for the workforce — there's no place to put them."

"If we have quality rental housing and mid-range priced housing, we will attract more workers to town," she said. "There are apartments available in Norton, but they're not suitable for workers who are bringing their family with them."

There are several ongoing proj-

ects that economic development is working on. One is the State Street Apartments, which would be in the building that houses Sander Bed and Bath, State Farm Insurance and Mortensen's Computer Supply. The apartments would be in the upper level of the building.

Something else that has been considered is the Rental Property Licensing Ordinance. The ordinance would require property owners who rent houses in Norton to meet standards that ensure their rentals are safe to live in. Economic development has done the research on similar ordinances in other cities and given the information to the Norton City Council to review and decide, though Ms. Becker doesn't think something like that will be passed

in Norton.

"Sometimes landlords can't afford to fix the damage done by tenants, and so they wouldn't be able to rent the property," said Ms. Becker. The Free Lot Program, used by many counties in Kansas, is another option being considered. Under the program, as long as certain criteria are met, cities and counties are giving away land for people to build homes on.

"A common guideline is that the home has to be worth \$100,000 at a minimum," said Ms. Becker. "It varies from community to community, and we've seen mixed results."

The Neighborhood Revitalization Plan and Demolition Assistance are programs that have seen several successes.

According to Ms. Becker's report, the revitalization plan allows cities to pass a plan to give property owners incentives to rehabilitate existing structures and build new ones through a tax rebate program. The Norton City Council passed the plan on Nov. 13, 2007. Each of the 28 taxing districts in Norton County have the option of adopting the plan in their district. Fifteen taxing districts have adopted the plan, nine are still considering it, and four voted to not approve the plan. Agricultural, commercial and residential structures all qualify for the program. At the end of

2008, Norton County approved 12 applications: six residential, two commercial and four agricultural. The demolition assistance program offers local governments up to \$2,000 for self-designated demolition programs in 2009.

"It's easier to sell a house if there is an empty lot next to it instead of a dilapidated house," said Ms. Becker.

Economic Development has also looked into how much it would cost to purchase the Norton Commons, an income-based apartment complex in Norton. "We aren't looking at it for economic development to purchase,

but we'd like to see someone local or maybe Northwest Kansas Planning and Development own the Commons," said Ms. Becker. "All we did was research the purchase price."

Individual housing program assistance has also been a success. Economic development assisted five individuals in receiving housing assistance in 2008. Two people were approved for the United States Department of Agriculture First Time Homebuyers Program, two accessed the Kansas Energy Efficiency Program, and one took advantage of the Midwest Energy HowSmart Program.

## Disc golf tourney to aid God's Pantry

Special to The Telegram

The Kansas Disc Golf Association and Norton Disc Golf Club will host a Winter Food Drive Disc Golf Tournament at Elmwood Park on Saturday, Jan. 31. All proceeds will go to God's Pantry. Individuals or businesses wishing to make a donation are asked to contact Don Mordecai, tournament director.

Participants are asked to bring some canned goods or non-perishable food items for the Pantry.

Disc golfers taking part in the

tourney, will receive a special Kansas Disc Golf Association Food Drive disc, and another disc for their \$20 entry fee. This disc package is valued at \$35.00.

Participants will be also entered in a statewide activity where they could win one of several disc golf packages or even a New Disc Golf Basket valued at over \$250.00 (that to be held at a later date).

There will also be "Closest to the Pin" prizes for all divisions, but there will not be any extra payout for this tournament. The

payout is the disc package.

The tournament will be one round in the morning, with players meeting at 9:45 a.m. and tee off at 10 a.m. Lunch will be provided.

After lunch, the players will decide if they want to play another round of singles, a round of doubles, or depending on the weather, to call it a day. But it's one round and lunch for sure, even if there is inclement weather.

If you are planning to attend, call tournament director Mr. Mordecai so a count can be taken for lunch.

## Building: wiring another concern

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to Norton County for the new Emergency Medical Services building, as per the State of Kansas requirements.

Norton County has six ambulances, four of which are kept in Norton. The other two are in Alma and Lenora.

The electrical wiring is another area of concern in the current building, especially with all the electronic and medical equipment that needs to be used and charged in the building for use in the ambulances.

After Norton County hired BG Consultants for their architect services for the building, the commissioners opened the project for bids in December, but all the bids came in significantly higher than the architect's estimates. Steve

Arpin, BG Consultants, said one of the reasons for the high bids is the cost of shipping and supplies, and also, because the grant is federally funded, any contractor has to follow federal wage regulations — pay his employees the federal wages for each specific job.

The bids will be reopened this month, and presented to the commission in mid-February. The grant specifies that a contract between the county and a contractor must be signed by March 1.

The county also looked at other buildings in Norton to move the Emergency Medical Services to, but none were suitable.

"There were traffic flow issues, being able to safely and quickly get an ambulance out of the bays and onto the roads; some didn't have easy access to the highways; and others didn't have quick access to the employees," said Mr. Wyatt. "The county felt the best option was to build a new building."

The location for the new Emer-

gency Medical Services building will be at the intersection of Highway 36 and Road 1W, by Prairie Land Electric. The county purchased the property from Prairie Land Electric.

The first three contractors who bid on the job in November projected it would take nearly a year to build. Mr. Wyatt said that time frame could have been due to winter weather being factored in, and it's possible the new bids will have shorter build times because winter won't be an issue.

According to Mrs. Griffey, the county received a Community Development Block Grant from the Kansas Department of Commerce, which distributes federal funds to Kansas cities and counties looking to improve their communities.

The grant is given to communities that have predominantly low and moderate income persons for the purpose of increasing health and safety.

## Retiring: Improved roads top achievement

(Continued from Page 1)

had made in 4-H in high school, and that is how I was able to go to college," he said.

When asked what he was most proud of doing as a commissioner, Mr. Lang said, "I think the road improvements with the millings has been one of the best things I've done. We're getting closer to making the roads all-weather accessible."

"I'm also proud to have helped Rural Fire District #2 get a brand new fire truck. I received a lot of calls from people in the county who were concerned about their homes. I'm glad I was able to help them out. Also, we had the sales tax voted on by the people, reducing the mill levy. It has been very successful," said Mr. Lang.

Mr. Lang said he is going to miss working with the people in the county. He will return to farming full-time with his son, Mike Lang.

"Thank you to everyone who has given us their cooperation and support," said Mr. Lang.

Commissioner Applegate wasn't the only one sworn in Monday morning. 17th District Judicial Judge William B. Elliott went to the commissioners' room and swore in Sheriff Troy Thomson, County Clerk Robert Wyatt, County Treasurer Cynthia Linner, Register of Deeds Wanda Vincent, County Commissioner John Miller and County Attorney R. Doug Sebelius.

Commissioner Applegate said she's excited to begin her duties because, "it gives me a new dimension of service. It's been a goal of mine since 1997 to be a county commissioner, since I have the time it takes to do the job."

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