

# Rawlins County optimistic about future

By Tisha Cox

*Colby Free Press*

From focusing on leadership to free land and other incentives, Rawlins County Economic Development has plans for the future.

Chris Sramek, economic development director in Atwood, said general economic development efforts focus on leadership and getting people to come back to the community.

The organization also is working with people around the county to develop future leaders, he said. That includes hometown competitiveness, promoting youth leadership, charitable foundations and more.

"Youth is an area we focus on," he said.

They promote FFA and 4-H, and also sponsor a youth entrepreneurship contest, he said. Students come up with an idea to start a business, and the top three are awarded \$1,000, \$700 or \$500 to get going.

The agency targets alumni to return home to start a business or work in the community.

The Atwood Second Century Development Fund has contributed \$50,000 in community projects, Mr. Sramek said. The community also has the Area Community Enrichment Foundation.

An ambitious venture for the county is offering free land to businesses or families to relocate to Rawlins County.

"We have that available to businesses, their employees or new people to move to the com-

munity," Mr. Sramek said.

When that started, he said, there were many new homes for sale. The first stage was to get those sold, and that has happened.

"That's a good thing," he said. "Now we're to the point we need newer construction."

Now, they have offered free land on four lots. They have 24 lots, he said, but want to work on the first four first. They have two applications, and are working on the financing and home plans.

They also have the Rawlins County Neighborhood Revitalization Program, which offers a tax credit for renovating an existing home or business.

The Lakeside Motel in Atwood was renovated using the tax credits, and other businesses have used it to expand or put up shop buildings.

A family from Colorado that was trying to use the free land program switched to this program when they bought a farm and renovated the home and barn, Mr. Sramek said. About 30 projects have been finished so far.

The county also is trying to attract retirees and families interested in getting their children into a better school than that in an urban area.

To do that, sometimes people have to take a different job at first, Mr. Sramek said, but eventually move up the job ladder and buy a better home.

A student credit incentive is available, a \$1,200 cash incentive a business can apply to-

ward rent, mortgage payment or building maintenance for each student it brings into the school district.

"Our goal is to put 25 new students in this year," he said, adding that the goal is 50 in 2008 and 100 in 2009.

A company that manufactures small medical implants and joint replacement parts is moving into the old school at Herndon, he said, and is bringing five to 10 employees in the next year. Within the next three years, that number should go up to 50. They are taking advantage of the student incentive.

Mr. Sramek said it is meant to help build long-term relationships between a business and the community.

Leadership is a concern because of outmigration and an aging population.

"It's been a challenge to replace them," he said of those who have retired.

A mixture of new people and returners will be needed to help make the economic efforts successful, he added.

With an older generation, he said, charitable dollars are leaving. Leaders are trying to promote people leaving a percentage of their estate for the community when they die.

Renewable energy and technology are other areas the agency supports. A wind farm proposal is on the table, Mr. Sramek said, and the school district is bringing a wind turbine to the high school for students to learn about.

## Rawlins County

- **Money spent** for economic development in Rawlins County in 2006 — \$28,000.
- **Population** today 2,643, in 2000 2,966, in 1990 3,404, in 1980, 4,105.
- **People working** today 1,334, in 2000 1,440, in 1990 1,607, in 1980 2,261.
- **Economic Development Director** — Chris Sramek, two years service.
- **EDC office** at 112 S. Fourth St., Atwood. Phone (785) 626-3640.
- **Median family income** in 2000 — \$32,105.

"We have plenty of wind, and are a prime location to manufacture wind turbines and put them up," he said.

Mr. Sramek said he was someone who came back and started his own business.

By focusing on the population decline, the director said, it could be possible to reverse it.

If more businesses come over the next five years, it could happen.

With government, business and individuals working on it, it could be possible.



From left: Abby Hissong, Tammy Fredrickson, and Fonda Farr

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