



NEWS

Communities must take lead to ensure housing, official says

By Sarah Kessinger

Published:

Wednesday, October 8, 2008 2:56 PM CDT

Federal programs can offer some "tools" to help Marshall County start addressing its housing needs. But local communities must take the lead if they hope to ensure a future housing supply, said Chuck Banks, director of the Kansas rural development office for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"We just really encourage communities to take ownership of these issues," Banks told a round-table discussion organized by the Marshall County Economic Development Office on Oct. 1 at Marysville's City Building.

"No one party can solve this," he said. "If areas are concerned about this, it's going to take strong leadership to bring it to the table. It's going to take a partnership of the public, private and non-profit groups. If your community is going to prosper, you have to come together. Affordable housing is directly tied to economic growth."

The county has a solid foundation to start addressing its housing needs, Banks said.

"You guys have a great situation here, a good employment base, good schools, good transportation, you're very much ahead."

The Topeka-based Banks warned that the credit crunch experienced nationwide is of great concern to lenders, but that local banks should strive to continue to support much-needed housing projects.

He also noted that today's fuel prices add to the problem.

"I am really concerned about this fuel issue. I think it's a real threat to our communities" and the prospects for employing workers who commute.

"Not only do we have a housing challenge," he said, "we have a workforce challenge."

Marshall County, like much of rural America, is struggling with a shortage of moderately priced homes. Developers in Kansas often say it is difficult to build new houses for less than \$150,000, yet much of the workforce cannot afford that price range.

Older housing stock also needs rehabilitation, which is a challenge as building costs grow. Banks encouraged the county's communities to deal with abandoned housing where back taxes are owed.

Federal housing programs will work with local programs, he said. The USDA provided \$118 million in federal housing loans during the federal fiscal year that just ended.

He said they are working with several Kansas high school vocational programs that are helping to build lower-cost housing and sell it.

Communities can come up with create ways to tackle the issue, Banks said.

"You all are going to have to get your arms around it," he said. "You're seeing some really progressive things happen here. So do it now when it's easier, when you have the resources. Get your private sector, your faith community, your non-profits together."

Federal housing programs available:

Single-family housing programs — guaranteed loans, direct loans, home repair grants and loans.

Multi-family (rental) housing programs — multi-family housing guaranteed loans, multi-family housing direct loans.

Home energy efficiency support is also available.

For more information on USDA's housing programs in Kansas: Tim Rogers, program director, 785-271-2718 or email tim.rogers@ks.usda.gov.

To reach the USDA rural development area office in Manhattan: Richard Boyles, 785-776-7582 or email Richard.boyles@ks.usda.gov.

Copyright © 2008 - Marysville Advocate