

**By Jan Schultz**

***The Imperial Republican***

A recently-completed housing study in the city of Imperial provides some good information, but also highlights some areas of concern.

Leslie Carlholm, the city's community development director, reported on the study at the Nov. 23 council meeting.

There are both positives and red flags of concern that can be drawn from the survey, Carlholm said.

On the positive side, Carlholm noted that there have been a lot of new jobs and opportunities created here. During 2005-06 (the last year full data is available), 78 new jobs were created in the county.

And, according to some of Imperial's largest employers, there is anticipation that in the next one to five years, 20 additional new jobs would be created within the city of Imperial.

"Jobs are still in place here, and new people are coming in," Carlholm noted, which is a good thing.

However, housing to serve those new employees is far from adequate.

"We do not have adequate housing here," she said.

While that's a common problem in many communities Imperial's size, Carlholm believes the survey results indicate the city is at a crossroads.

"We're at one of those turning points—we either move forward or we go backwards," she said.

The survey indicates the two major needs are: 1) workforce housing for low-to-moderate income residents, and 2) general rental housing, including three-bedroom units, affordable units, duplexes and multi-family units.

"If we are going to do anything with housing development, it keeps coming back to costs and if it can cash flow (for developers)," she noted.

To make the needed housing a reality, Carlholm said it will need to involve some kind of public/private partnership "with some creative ideas."

The city is looking at other communities that have had success in meeting their housing needs, "and see if we can replicate them here," she said.

One major area of concern involved the rental properties in town. Fifty-five, or 46%, of the 120 rental units available in Imperial were considered in poor/very poor condition.

Referring to the condition of rentals, the study highly recommended that the city adopt rental housing standards "to help prevent the dilapidation of homes and the continuation of renting those homes when they are unsafe for habitation."

At last week's meeting, the city council began the process of developing rental housing standards by reviewing such standards in use in other Nebraska towns.

As part of the housing study info gathering, a separate review of the Hispanic workforce population within Imperial and their housing situations was tallied. A total of 58 completed surveys were returned.

The overwhelming statistics from that survey were that 43% of the Hispanic families were spending more than half of their incomes on rent and utilities, while another 25% were paying roughly half of their incomes on their housing/utility bills.

Other information included in the housing study were various programs that can help first time

home-owners, owner occupied rehab programs and the potential for more of those in the future, as well as a potential of new homes that might be required in the next few years.

The information for the study was compiled over the summer months by Southwest Nebraska Community Betterment Corporation, which is headquartered in Grant. Staff from that firm drove each of Imperial's streets and did visual assessments.

The staff also used city housing/rental data, about 90 individual surveys and more than 100 additional surveys from employees at six of Imperial's major employers—Chase County Schools, Chase County Community Hospital, Allo Communications, Frenchman Valley Coop, 21st Century Equipment and Artistic Woodworking.

Half of the \$12,000 study was paid with a Nebraska Investment Finance Authority (NIFA) grant of \$6,000, which was matched by city funds. The Imperial Community Foundation applied for the housing study grant.

## Imperial housing statistics

### **Housing stock (owned or used as rentals)—Total of 928**

74% homes are owner occupied

8.8% homes are rentals

11% are mobile homes

3.3% homes vacant

3% homes were for sale

### **Housing condition**

34% excellent, needs no repair

25% good condition, needs minor repair

21% poor/very poor condition, needs major repair

19% fair condition, needs moderate repair

### **Total ☐ rentals—76 properties, totaling 120 units**

46% in poor/very poor condition, needing major repair

22% in good condition, needing minor repair

17% in excellent condition, needing no repair

8% in fair condition, needing moderate repair

2% in process of being repaired