

Housing shortage tops issues discussed at town hall meetings

**By Russ Pankonin and
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The Wauneta Breeze**

Officials with the Chase County Zoning Commission held four town hall meetings across the county last week. The purpose of the meetings was to discuss the future of Chase County and get public input for the county's updated comprehensive plan.

There were a total of four meetings held—one in Wauneta on Feb. 25, two on Feb. 26 in Champion and Imperial and another in Imperial on Feb. 27.

Public attendance at the meetings was slim. Five attended the meeting in Wauneta, four attended in Champion, three attended the evening meeting in Imperial and no members of the public attended the morning meeting in Imperial.

Chairman Charley Colton began each meeting by providing an overview of why the meetings were necessary. He explained the meetings were planned to provide county officials with public input to be used as the county updated its comprehensive plan. Colton summed up the rationale for the meetings by saying the plan will help officials know, "What we want the county to be and grow to."

The county began comprehensive planning when legislation was passed requiring all counties and municipalities to include an energy element in their plans. The update is necessary because of several issues that have occurred since the county's last comprehensive plan was written.

Keith Marvin, a consultant with Marvin Planning Consultants of David City, facilitated the meetings.

Marvin told attendees the purpose of the meetings was to first identify issues seen within the county and secondly to gain insights on how to address those issues and resolve them.

Housing

The first issue, and arguably the largest, that came up at the Wauneta and Imperial meetings was the need for more housing.

Community members shared their concerns over the lack of rental properties available in Wauneta and within the county. Rodney Keiser, a business owner in Wauneta, said when a property came available he rented it so when he eventually hired a new staff member there would be a place for the person to live. He rented the home for four months before he hired the staff person.

Marvin asked those in attendance to share possible solutions to the housing shortage. One that got a lot of attention in Wauneta was the issue of many vacant homes that sit unused and unrented.

Joey Large, a member of the Wauneta Economic Development Committee (WEDC), said the community needs to find a solution for people who own homes that are not being rented, saying that finding a way to get those homes on the market is needed.

The price of building rental properties was discussed as a snag in the locals' ability to create housing. Community members discussed what a reasonable rent amount would be. Those in attendance felt rent in Wauneta should fall under \$600 per month. They also pointed out that a private investor cannot build for that amount of rent. Another WEDC member, Tony Cribelli, said, "Someone's got to be able to make their costs back plus a little profit."

Colton noted some new rental homes are under construction in Imperial but those at the Imperial meeting said further need exists.

Colton said the county has tried, through the comprehensive plan and through zoning regulations, to encourage development in communities as much as they can. He said the planning commission has also tried to encourage the communities to lessen the costs to the county to build roads as the areas are developed.

The county's zoning regulations cover rural and unincorporated areas of the county. The incorporated communities of Wauneta, Imperial and Lamar each have their own zoning regulations.

Renewable energy

Jim and Jan Graham of Imperial said they were in attendance to see if there's been any interest in developing renewable energy, especially wind energy.

Colton said existing zoning regulations would allow for the development of a wind farm. He noted wind energy could be a possible opportunity for economic development.

Much of the development being done in the state today is by out-of-state companies, he noted. He felt the issue was out of the county's hands as the energy companies serving the county are all public power entities.

Marvin said the leases being paid for land to put the units on has been a boost for land owners seeking income.

Leadership development

The leadership issue was described as a "people problem" by one of the attendees at the Wauneta meeting. The discussion included ways to encourage the next generation of county and community leaders—those aged 22 to 35—to step up. Mentor programs and leadership development programs were mentioned as possible solutions to the issue.

Other issues

Other issues discussed at the various meetings included recreation, elderly care, education, health care and childcare. Those in attendance felt the county was doing pretty well on most of those issues.

Attendees also discussed the county's plans for the Champion Mill Park, which was recently turned over to the county.

County Commissioner Chuck Vette said the county plans to improve the property and run it as it is. The county also plans to expand and improve the grounds. Several encouraged efforts to promote the site to enhance tourism opportunities in the county.

The issue of education received attention at the meetings, as well. All agreed K-12 education in Wauneta and Imperial remains strong, but some felt there should be more opportunities for technical or trade post secondary education.

Access to technology

Greg Hayes, a new member on the county zoning commission, said it remains key for this area

to have robust access to the Internet and other technological advancements.

Connectivity, whether by mobile phone, broadband or wireless, plays a much bigger role in everyday life, he added.

He noted the county has been fortunate to have good access to the Internet and anticipates that will continue to improve as time passes.

Next steps

Marvin told attendees there will be additional opportunities for public input before the updated comprehensive plan is completed. He plans to meet with local economic development groups and housing groups to gain additional insights.

He also plans to talk with area high school students. "If this plan is implemented and successfully implemented, the kids in high school are the ones this plan is for and in most cases they are very willing to talk," he said.