

By Russ Pankonin

The Imperial Republican

Four years after the first effort began, Imperial can now claim its designation as a Nebraska Economic Development Certified Community (NEDCC).

Imperial joins 34 other communities across Nebraska that have earned the designation.

So why is this designation so important for Imperial?

The designation opens doors to economic development opportunities that non-certified communities never get a shot at.

As a NEDCC, Imperial has now joined the short list of communities that have proven they are "economic-development prepared," said Leslie Carlholm, Imperial's community development director.

She said Imperial first sought the designation in 2008 but one of the major stumbling blocks came from the fact the city did not have control over a piece of development property.

That's one of the key elements in the certification process.

With economic development funds that have resulted from LB 840 city sales tax receipts, the city was able to purchase 77 acres on the east edge of Imperial, now known as Cornerstone Commercial Park.

In addition, Carlholm said they have developed plans for infrastructure and completed the first phase of environmental review.

With that completed, Carlholm restarted the certification process last year.

Becoming a NEDCC has been a key goal for Imperial's development program, said Russ Pankonin, chair of the Community Redevelopment Authority and a member of the city's economic development team.

"This elevates Imperial to a new standard that will be beneficial to our growth in years to come," Pankonin said.

He also praised the efforts of Carlholm.

"Leslie spent countless hours during the past several years, working hand-in-hand with Nebraska Department of Economic Development staff to ensure all necessary steps were completed for Imperial to earn this designation.

"Without those efforts, this milestone could have never been achieved," he added.

The Nebraska Economic Development Certified Program, sponsored by the Nebraska Diplomats, is one of a handful nationally that recognize communities' economic development preparedness.

The Nebraska Department of Economic Development administers the application process.

"Imperial's well-rounded, sensible approach to meeting its community's growth and development needs is a shining example for all Nebraska communities," said Jeff Scherer, Nebraska Diplomats president.

NEDCC benefits

One of the biggest benefits of going through the process is that it strengthens Imperial's readiness for economic development.

Carlholm noted it's a rigorous process that included gathering large amounts of information on labor force, wages, etc.

As a NEDCC, Imperial has shown that it can readily respond to a request for information from a prospect, as well as respond to requests for proposals, which is often the next step in the

recruitment process.

The final test for certification came this spring when the city's economic development team played host to a mock prospect visit conducted by the state Department of Economic Development (DED).

Carlholm said Imperial proved they are well prepared and can handle a visit from a prospect. Often, prospects will visit several certified communities in one or two days. This means a community only gets two to three hours to sell itself.

Being an NEDCC brings other benefits.

The state helps market certified communities to business and industry and communities can participate in DED's marketing advertising and trade shows.

It publicly recognizes the community as an economic development leader in the state.

It makes Imperial eligible to apply for "Downtown Revitalization" competitive funds through DED.

In the scoring of applications for DED's Community Development Block Grants for economic development, certified communities get additional points.

The same is true if a developer is applying for tax credits for low-income housing projects through the Nebraska Investment Finance Authority.

"I'm so excited for what it could mean for the community," Carlholm said.

Achievements

Imperial's economic development programs have already made an impact on the community. They assisted Allo Communications LLC in obtaining a block grant loan in the infancy of the business. Since its inception in 2002, the company has grown to 40 employees (25 in Imperial) dispersed throughout its multiple locations.

A Business Coaching and Individualized Assistance Program was added in 2010. Thus far, the program has assisted with three business transitions to new ownership, retaining 10 jobs; four new business start ups creating 16 jobs; and three businesses accessing customized job training for employees.

The 70-plus acre Cornerstone Commercial Park is owned by Imperial's Economic Development Program, and features six light industrial and four highway business district sites. The re-plat, zoning and infrastructure development design have been completed.

Other successful projects include the formation of the Career Academy by Chase County Schools and Mid-Plains Community College, the joint venture by the school and city on the new pool and locker room facility and the creation of several new daycare facilities.