

Housing ... if we don't build it, they won't stay

It's an issue all too familiar to Sheridan business owners:

A prospective employee interviews for the job, loves it, may even accept it and start work. But a few days or a couple of weeks later, he — or she — is submitting a resignation.

The reason: He can't find a place to live that he can afford on his new salary.

Housing prices are high in Sheridan County and have been for several years. That's good news for those who are selling their homes or who have apartments or houses to rent.

But it's bad news for those trying to rent or buy a home on the salaries typically paid in Sheridan County.

Forward Sheridan Strategic Planning Task Force, comprised of Sheridan County citizens, has identified the lack of reasonably priced housing as one of the top 10 challenges faced not only by the county's business owners, but also by anyone considering starting or moving a business to this area.

In 2005 the city, the county and the Sheridan Housing Action Committee commissioned a countywide housing needs assessment.

The study concluded that, if there is no major growth in the area in the next four years, there would be a need for 2,500 more housing units at different price points in the area by 2010.

Housing problems fall into three gen-

eral categories: lack of inventory, a need for education and a need for resources.

Efforts are under way to meet the challenge. Despite these efforts, the housing inventory remains low, especially starter homes.

Solutions to this problem include construction not only of more residences, but also more rental units.

To meet this need, SHAC offers no-interest, no-payment second mortgages through a \$500,000 grant from the Wyoming Community Development Authority.

This is the only gap-financing grant awarded in Wyoming. Most working families can qualify for assistance. Local lenders are offering grants for down payment assistance to individuals.

SHAC is working with government entities to facilitate more work force housing.

The city has donated land for work force housing, it has set aside funding for infrastructure and is streamlining the development process and creating incentives for developers, such as reducing fees and allowing construction on smaller lots.

The Sheridan community is becoming

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Planning for Sheridan's economic development



a model for housing solutions in the state.

Another bar to affordable housing is the cost of building infrastructure — everything from streets to water and sewer facilities.

All of these costs, along with

the price of the land itself, serve to drive up the final cost of the completed home or apartment building.

Sheridan County and all four municipalities recently allocated \$2 million in Wyoming state coal-bed natural gas impact funds to create 185 work force housing lots in four developments, along with 200 market-rate lots for housing.

This is a start to meet the projected need for 2,500 housing units in all prices by 2010. But more action is needed.

Therefore, Forward Sheridan and SHAC have formed a Housing Committee comprised of bankers, developers, the city and county planners, real estate agents and area residents.

This is a component of Forward Sheridan's next five-year Economic Development Strategic Plan.

The goal of the Housing Committee is to develop specific strategies for achieving that goal of 2,500 new homes in the community ... for you.

The Sheridan area needs a housing plan to be implemented with the county and city future comprehensive plans and design plans.

Coming up with the numerical need for housing is one thing. You cannot get to that number in a specific time without having a strategy to implement.

We all need to realize that providing housing that working people can afford isn't a luxury but an economic necessity. So is putting up homes over the \$160,000 range for citizens moving up and newcomers to fill the vacant jobs in our area.

It isn't a matter of "if we build it, they will come."

It's a matter of if we don't build it, they won't stay.

Marie Lowe is executive director of the Sheridan Housing Action Committee.

"A Community Affair" is a weekly column from citizens who support Forward Sheridan, a professional business organization of invested partners whose purpose is to develop and maintain a sound economy in Sheridan County. Philippe Chino is president/CEO of Forward Sheridan.