

RURAL CHAMPION HOUSING PROJECTS

CITIES OF HARPER & ANTHONY

Background Information

In a two-year span, cities in Harper County, such as Harper and Anthony have joined other local forces to engage on multiple projects together in order to sustain rural Kansas economy in their county.

Many economic efforts were made but were frequently met with massive roadblocks. The lack of available housing was quickly realized and required work from multi-jurisdictional to solve the issue.

There were several needs (vacant properties, dilapidation, affordable housing, rentals vs. owner-occupied, lack of middle-income housing, etc.) that required attention but were proven to be difficult due to the staff time required to accomplish specific tasks. There were four major difficulties:

- identifying the volume of need in each category;
- researching the many options and programs that are available to help address them: RHID, MIH, Landbanks, CDBG and so many more;
- matching the appropriate resource to its corresponding need category;
- developing a calculated and well thought out strategic approach to resolving the housing crisis.

Rural Champion Project Implementation Grant will be used to fund housing incentive grant programs for residential property owners (Demo, Paint, Exterior Rehab, Vacancies) in both Harper and Anthony. Each city's governing body will determine match and guidelines to best fit their communities. The cities held town hall meetings to share findings from the housing assessment process. From the town halls, Harper and Anthony's housing committees presented the Housing Assessment Tool (HAT) to their respective governing bodies. As a result of feedback, mini grants were identified as a way to offer accelerated progress for improvements and positive impact in the communities while larger developments are pursued.

Gaps/Barriers Identified: Capacity Barriers

- Most counties in southcentral Kansas lacked representation from realtors, builders and contractor fields.
- Social media was invaluable in notifying public of program progress and conducting public surveys. Gaining support and involvement from local newspapers was found to be difficult as well.

Steps to Success

The Harper County Growth Initiative was to identify problems and then prioritize areas of strength and weakness to direct planning for housing inventory remedies. In short term, success will be difficult to quantify. It is suggested that working with identified local partners and businesses, the success can be measured better in the quality of affordable housing to the current housing inventory.

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

- The community housing committee consisted of 27 members. All schools, hospitals, local businesses and demographic stakeholders participated. The success of the HAT is a result of the diversity and passion of the housing committee.
- It was a collaborative effort amongst the cities to address common issues and unique city attributes. The joint committee worked with the idea that any improvement in one city would benefit the other cities, too. The committee then broke into individual groups and using their specific information, identified their unique strengths and weaknesses and prioritized their findings to bring back to the joint housing committee for sharing and planning.

Solutions

Initial solutions to make progress:

- The individual city findings were similar, with a unique idea that a community housing specialist would be advantageous to all the residents, landlords, financial institutions, government entities and employers. The community housing specialist with all stakeholders and keep up to date on resources within all levels, network with state and federal programs and work with residents who cannot be expected to know all the housing resources available.
- Education was identified as an important need – not only to residents as to programs (including local) but to financial institutions' ability to participate in certain federal (USDA) and state (Kansas Department of Commerce). The state has training videos and webinars, but this information must get to the appropriate group.
- Communities would like to establish incentive programs, land banks and strengthen partnerships with businesses and the Harper County Community Foundation.
- Funds for incentives will be a priority need and with budgets for municipalities being

set once a year, rural areas must be creative moving forward.

Transitions/Evolutions/Changes/Shifts to the solutions:

- From the beginning, the project was very motivated to identify problems before solutions. Statistics and public/business owners were instrumental to keep the solutions from being out there before the findings.
- Much of the initial time was spent figuring out where to start and how to learn/research the availability and uses of all the resources and program.
- The findings of the committee depended on having all the options to prioritize after the needs identified by the statistics, public engagement surveys, town halls and the business surveys.

Resources Identified

At times resources needed to make a project successful were not always financial. It's important to be knowledgeable of the primary resources, but also look beyond the obvious funders and think about what else is needed to carry out a similar project.

The cities provided assistance with their time and specifically with the Rural Champion Grant. The local internet business would provide refreshments for each townhall meeting and other local businesses would allow their staff to show support by participating in the committee meetings. The meeting spaces were all provided by local agencies. The Harper County Community Foundation has been involved in the committee assessment process and has indicated support as actual programs are implemented in the future, including a possible "Match Day" and will be asked to help with incentive funding.

The Harper County Appraiser's Office offered services using queries to provide statistical information was a major source of information. Without the local information, a successful HAT cannot happen – a contact was made with Data Access & Support Center (DASC) to see if they could create the GIS layer of local information. Other local county economic/community directors and other county staff were always helpful.

State or Federal resources that were valuable in learning about housing activities and data gathering for the HAT process included:

- The Kansas Department of Commerce/Office of Rural Prosperity – Rural Champion
 - [ORP Websites](#), the [K-State First Friday](#) events, and all the recorded webinars
- Data gathering for the HAT- DASC at KU

assisting with community level data GIS level to identify county appraiser information [KHRC website](#) with program and grant information and staff were helpful with questions

[U.S. Census](#) data and the [American Community Survey website](#) [Local Housing Solutions website](#) with tool for creating municipal reporting

LINN COUNTY

Background Information

Linn County recently adopted a comprehensive plan, providing a timely opportunity to work on a significant need in their county. Darcy Wilson was the Rural Champion to guide this project.

Linn County, like many small communities across the state, has suffered a lack of quality, affordable housing in recent years. Housing stock throughout the county is aging. The cities have made concerted efforts recently to condemn and remove blighted homes, but there have been very few homes built to replace the torn-down ones. Lack of available homes causes employees having to commute over 60 miles one way to work and creates challenges for employers to recruit to fill open positions.

We knew we needed housing so with the Champions program starting in October and the MIH being released we felt that was the solution. We applied and were not awarded. The county had not addressed the housing issue in years. It was talked about but there had not been an incentive plan in place for over 15 years and a Housing Assessment had not been done to anyone's knowledge.

Rural Champion Project Implementation Grant is being used to fund Housing Incentive Programs that have been developed as part of the Rural Champion project.

- The Linn County Economic Development Empty Nester Incentive Program is intended to assist homeowners in the county that wish to move to a more manageable sized rental or home within the county. The goal of this incentive is to increase available housing stock while maximizing the efficiency of the current homes in Linn County. Applications may be made up to \$2,500, with a 1:1 match required.
- The goal of the Linn County Economic Development Paint Linn County Incentive is to upgrade curb appeal of residential properties in Linn County. The incentive is offered to residential property owners who wish to paint the exterior of a home or housing unit(s).

Awards up to \$500 may be awarded per eligible residential property.

- The Linn County Economic Development Vacant Home Sale Incentive Program is intended to encourage the listing and sale of long-term vacant houses in the county, thereby increasing available housing stock. Applications may be made up to \$2,500, with a 1:1 match required.

Gaps/Barriers Identified: Capacity Barriers

- Most challenges were identified along the way. It's important to address issues as they arise and stay flexible in order to handle and balance anything that may come up.
- Completing steps early or getting out of order can make it difficult to follow. It's important to stay organized because there will be a lot of information to gather.

Steps to Success

A new Comprehensive Plan was adopted by the Board of County Commissioners on August 29, 2022. While several goals were identified in the plan, the one that consistently rises to the top is improving housing throughout the county. There are seven small cities located in Linn County that have suffered from low quality and affordable housing.

Getting started:

The vision is to physically see community pride restored through multiple housing efforts:

- Revitalization of each city
- Demolish or restore the dilapidated homes
- Occupy vacant and new land to build housing
- Continue to take pride in their neighborhoods

Building the committee, workgroup, and relationships:

- The Housing Committee consists of elected officials, banker, realtor, school district, homeowners, property manager, large business representative, small business representative, and a healthcare worker.
- Local, regional and state relationships were developed with ORP, KDOC, KHRC, SEKRPC.
- Citizens of Linn County participated in a housing survey

Solutions

Initial solutions to make progress:

- Initial steps included learning and education. Meetings with the cities introduced the possibility of a Neighborhood Revitalization (NRP), a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) or Moderate-Income Housing (MIH). Including discussions about the possible options is important when trying to decide with route is most ideal for the needs and goals.
- A housing committee was created in which

would present to Commissioners and answer any questions. The goal for the committee was to collaborate work on a NRP for residential and commercial. The Commissioners passed the NRP.

- Primary goals were identified by completing the Housing Assessment Tool (HAT). Through the HAT process, three countywide incentive plans were identified to create: Demolition Assistance, Long Term Vacancy, and Paint Linn County.
- With the findings, it useful to participate in a Housing Interagency Advisory Committee (HIAC) meeting with Commerce, KHRC, USDA-Rural Development, and Federal Home Loan Bank representatives.
- It's important to stay engaged with the community by following through with each plan. Make sure others see the change throughout the county, so more people will take part next year when a larger budget is granted.

Transitions to the solutions:

- It is required to have a HAT completed for this project.
- By completing the HAT, it's now a required document for the MIH Grant. It provides vital information that show target areas where to start and where to prioritize.

Resources Identified

Funding to support this project came from ARPA funds that were allocated as match for MIH grant, and county budgeted funds directly to the project.

Non-financial resources by the county were utilized to provide employee time dedicated to the project, as well vehicle use and office space.

Important Resources for Future Housing Projects

Every community is different, but there are commonalities with who should be involved in housing projects. Key partners were identified.

Partner organizations to include:

- City leadership
- County leadership
- County appraiser
- Businesses
- Community Foundations
- Telecommunications entity
- School districts
- Chambers of Commerce
- Economic/Community Development organizations
- K-State Research & Extension
- Lenders
- Contractor/Builders
- Realtors
- Regional planning commission

Funding for projects is always a significant consideration for development as well as success. These are some options to consider for seeking funds. Information on these and many more options can be found at <https://www.kansascommerce.gov/housing/>. Funding resources or grants to connect with include:

Local

- Cities
- Counties
- Community Foundations
- Telecommunications entity

State

[Community Development Block Grants \(CDBG\)](#)

[Kansas Housing Resources Corporation \(KHRC\)](#)

[Federal Loan Home Bank \(FHLB\)](#)

[USDA-Rural Development](#)

There are always learning curves for every type of project. Here are some overarching tips to take into consideration when launching a similar project.

Best practices include:

- Best place to start is with the [Housing Assessment Tool \(HAT\)](#). This website has a tremendous amount of support information and resources.
- Make sure to have buy-in from leadership
- Build a strong housing committee that is committed to being engaged
- Education for all, to keep the “coffee shop” conversations more “reality” conversation
- Don’t get frustrated when you realize steps are done backwards or started in the middle
- Stay focused on the goal and remember that the hard work is worth it