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City to look at housing

Council will discuss strategies for addressing data in '09 assessment.

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City leaders Tuesday will take a look at the housing situation in Hutchinson and a list of new strategies to address problems.

At a study session, the Hutchinson City Council will go over a draft of the 2009 Housing Needs Assessment, developed by St. Louis-based Development Strategies.

The assessment compiles information, including an evaluation of existing housing programs, a market analysis and strategic plan for the future and information about strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the Hutchinson housing market.

It updates a similar Housing Needs Assessment that was completed in 2001.

Among other things, the latest assessment found that housing in Hutchinson is "generally affordable and attractive," that there is considerable community concern about housing conditions south of 11th Avenue, and that several niche housing types are needed, including market-rate rental housing priced above \$600 a month and for-sale housing priced between \$100,000 and \$130,000.

The assessment also found that housing conditions have generally deteriorated since 2001, with more than 5,000 properties receiving a worse rating.

Suggested strategies are as follows:

Strategy 1: Adopt the 2006 International Property Code.

The city's current Minimum Housing Code does not allow city inspectors to legally cite property owners for various nuisances - such as peeling paint and broken windows - that contribute to general neighborhood decline and blight. This code would provide more stringent and comprehensive regulations.

Strategy 2: Implement a Rental Occupancy Permit or Rental Registration System.

The city's current complaint-based housing inspection system "leaves considerable loopholes" for persistent violations.

Also, the complaint-based system allows for inconsistent enforcement because inspectors are only required to address code violations concerns when a complaint is filed.

Therefore, rental property owners should be required to register their properties and an occupancy-based code enforcement system should be instituted. Additional staff should be hired to enforce the new housing codes.

The assessment also suggests that the city create a system in which the most severe code violations - those that pose immediate health and safety risks - carry a higher fine and have a shorter remedy period.

It also suggests the city focus on correcting health and safety violations for the first one to two years of the new enforcement program.

Strategy 3: Formalize a "One-Stop-Shop" to include housing.

The city should create a central location where residents can obtain services and information. The intent of the practice would be to better inform residents of city programs that are available and of streamlining the development process.

The city already does this informally when working with developers. Formalizing the practice and applying it to housing will better position Hutchinson to take advantage of new housing opportunities.

Creating a one-stop-shop might include making pertinent information easy-to-access on the city's Web site, such as information about city housing programs, information about state and federal housing programs, links to local nonprofit housing providers and a revised Hutchinson Housing Handbook, among other things.

The assessment also suggests the city define a single "go-to" person to manage the one-stop-shop information and to take inquiries.

Strategy 4: Engage in a housing planning process focused on the concept of targeted area development.

This will allow the city to focus limited resources on specific areas. The city should identify community assets and strengths that can be used as starting points for development or redevelopment. Then, they should divide the community into districts according to the Housing Conditions Survey.

For example, the "Marketable Central Neighborhoods" - including the Houston-Whiteside

Historic District, Hyde Park and Crescent Park - are neighborhoods that might show signs of disinvestment but contain both housing stock and community amenities that make them attractive for reinvestment. Efforts in these areas should focus on consistent code enforcement, coordinated public improvements and encouraging the use of city programs.

On the other hand, in "Opportunity Neighborhoods" - including neighborhoods south of 11th Avenue - city efforts should include consistent code enforcement, partnerships with community groups and nonprofits for community cleanup and infill development opportunities and coordinated public improvements.

Strategy 5: Identify and market housing development opportunities.

To encourage the development of housing types that are not adequately provided for by the private market, the city should promote opportunities for unique "niche" housing products, such as furnished high-end and short-term rental housing that caters to medical professionals or downtown rental and for-sale housing.

In conjunction with promoting these opportunities, the city should offer public assistance to help reduce the risk of developing such projects, such as infrastructure improvements or tax abatements.

Strategy 6: Develop a housing marketing campaign.

This campaign would inform residents, potential residents, developers and employers considering locations in central Kansas about the range of housing options and potential development opportunities for housing in Hutchinson.

Strategy 7: Ensure quality development by providing development guides and prototypes.

Providing guidance and examples - such as a Best Practices Handbook, Infill Development Guide, and Housing Rehabilitation/Renovation Idea Book - would make it easier to develop housing in Hutchinson.

Strategy 8: Coordinate public investment with housing programs.

The intent of this strategy is to build upon public investments already taking place - such as street improvements or sidewalk replacement - to promote private housing investment.

This could include coordinating "community improvement" days with the completion of a major infrastructure project.

Strategy 9: Focus housing demolition plan in specific areas.

Each year the city budgets enough money to demolish about 10 structures. Currently, 60 homes

are on the list to be demolished.

Identifying the structures that are eligible for demolition and are located in targeted development areas can help prioritize what properties to demolish, allowing the city to make the most impact with its limited resources.

The assessment suggests the city focus on demolishing eligible structures that are near community assets or adjacent to major public investments.

Strategy 10: Develop plan to deal with vacant residential lots.

Reno County sells a significant amount of dilapidated and vacant property through tax sales to individuals who may not be able to follow through with making needed improvements. The city should be given first priority in acquisition of these properties.

The assessment suggests the city partner with local developers and nonprofits to purchase these lots in target areas and perhaps form a land bank.

Strategy 11: Continue to fund community improvement programs to encourage community participation and development and housing maintenance.

Funding programs such as Spring Cleanup, the CRUD Dumpster Program and the E-Waste Drop-off event promote community cohesiveness, attract matching funds or material donations and have a significant impact on a neighborhood in a short timeframe.

Strategy 12: Continue to fund existing housing programs and seek additional funds to expand.

Municipal housing programs, such as the innovative housing program, offer residents a valuable tool in addressing difficult, yet common, maintenance issues and show that the city is willing to work with residents to improve their properties.

Source: 2009 Hutchinson Housing Needs Assessment