



THE PONCA CITY NEWS

PONCA CITY, OKLAHOMA

Sessions Focus on Housing Issues

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Ponca City needs a larger workforce and more appropriate housing, participants in community stakeholders interviews repeatedly told a consultant for the city on Wednesday.

Kendig Keast Collaborative is conducting a series of meetings through Friday to gather information to use in revising Ponca City's Comprehensive Master Plan.

Wednesday's interviews all related to the broad category of economic development.

Jonathan Grosshans, an associate planner with Kendig Keast, led sessions with Ponca City Mayor Homer Nicholson and city staff, the Chamber of Commerce, Ponca City Tourism, the Ponca City Development Authority and representatives of the Central Business District, including the Main Street Program.

Participants in each of the sessions identified housing, local employment and workforce training as major issues necessary to Ponca City's economic health and future growth.

Steve Crank, chairman-elect of the Ponca City Chamber of Commerce, said advance manufacturing employees have an attitude and philosophy of lifetime learning.

"They are trained and retrained to meet the requirements of those jobs," he said.

Chamber Chairman Janet Martin said Ponca City's retail market needs to grow.

Tourism, including agritourism, is strong here and is marketed all over the world, Martin said. Those

marketing efforts draw people to Ponca City, including those who would like to hold business meetings and conferences here.

"We must have an event center as a place where people can meet," she said.

Grosshans asked the group where future retail shopping would best be located.

Mayor Homer Nicholson said Ponca City had a retail business study conducted by Buxton, a retail analysis company. Many of the companies Ponca City would like to attract already have done market research and have determined that Ponca City's population is too small to meet their location criteria.

Louise Abercrombie, business editor of The Ponca City News, said health care and technology were areas of potential growth, with training available at Pioneer Technology Center and University Learning Center at ConocoPhillips. She said there is a need for 24-hour child care.

Martin said Ponca City Medical Center has made a major investment in the new 17-bed emergency room and space remains available on the third floor of the nearby specialty building.

"Ponca City is a progressive area, but since 1989 most people remember 'the good old days,'" Derrin Hiatt said. "We've got to get over that attitude. We need to get our swagger back."

The city is attracting a large number of retirees who are returning to the area because of the quality of life Ponca City offers, Martin said.

Abercrombie said the Chamber of Commerce's new Young Area Professionals group has been meeting regularly and has developed a list of what its members want to see here.

Ponca City is more prepared to grow from the viewpoint of business readiness than in housing, the groups told Grosshans.

Ponca City Development Authority, which was praised as a top-notch organization, has expanded business opportunities and tries to look for companies that are a good fit with Ponca City, Martin said.

Housing, however, creates a chicken-and-egg situation. While the city is able to expand its infrastructure to accommodate new businesses, a lack

of appropriate housing has led to employees living outside of Ponca City. Many people who work in Ponca City are commuting from Stillwater or other areas outside the city limits.

Many of those workers live nearby, in rural areas where they can buy acreage properties which are suitable for larger homes than can be built on standard city lots.

When companies bring employees into the market, Martin said, they are commonly looking for four-bedroom homes.

"They say there is nothing here for them to buy," she said. "And they don't have time to have a home built."

Incoming employees also are accustomed to having a choice of several different housing styles. By comparison, Ponca City has little available housing stock and it is rare for local developers or builders to build speculative homes.

Many commuting workers are attracted to live in Stillwater by the availability of education, housing, entertainment and shopping, participants said.

In a session with Ponca City tourism officials, Grosshans asked about the levels of recent success in promoting the city.

Tourism coordinator MaryBeth Moore said the Tourism Bureau is doing well with a small budget and rated successes at better than the 85th percentile.

Over the next five to 10 years, Moore said the tourism group would like to see Ponca City continue its focus on keeping the city clean, with more attention to growth in the downtown area, including evening-friendly entertainment and dining.

"This keeps us from booking overnight tours," she said. "There's nothing for visitors to do in the evenings."

A conference center with meeting space for 150 people, including breakout rooms and overnight guest rooms also is needed, she said.

"The need and the interest are there," she said.

Representatives for the Ponca City Development Authority also met with Grosshans.

"We're on fire," Tim Burg said. "We need more people

and places for them to live."

PCDA is the No. 1 organization for economic development for cities of less than 50,000 residents, Burg said. The return on investment dollars has been two to one and has lessened Ponca City's dependency on a single employer by diversifying the local economy.

"We have the highest employment numbers and the lowest unemployment rate in our history. Construction permits are high," he said.

Every segment of Ponca City's economy is begging for labor, the group told Grosshans.

"We're dying for more workforce," Burg said. "We could set unprecedented growth if we had appropriate housing."

Ponca City's population has flat-lined in recent years, but the job count has increased by 1,800 in less than five months, the PCDA group said. Per capita income is up and the city has a diversified economy.

Part of that success can be attributed to training programs at Pioneer Technology Center, as well as education opportunities through Oklahoma State University and the University Learning Center, Dennis Ruttman said.

"We have successful programs that we can point to and say 'this program put 90 welders to work here,'" he said.

PCDA members said the authority is in the fifth year of a strategic plan. When the authority recruits businesses, one of the considerations is who will work for that company – will local people be hired or will the company bring its own workforce to Ponca City?

PCDA now is filling gaps based on feedback from current employers, finding compatible niche companies to fill gaps in the diversified economy.

Again, participants said, a critical factor is housing.

A broad range of housing options, at different prices, styles and locations are needed, they said.

Most homes being built currently are custom homes, with little or no speculative building providing a stock of homes to meet pent-up demand, participants said.

There is little entry-level housing because of a lack of

"move-up" housing. Participants said there is a lack of homes in the \$120,000 to \$180,000 price range for someone to move up to, so there is little existing housing available for the first-time buyer.

"There are 95 homes on the market and 83 Realtors," Mayor Nicholson said.

There also are waiting lists for people looking for apartments and townhouses.

Grosshans asked if Ponca City was ready for more business to locate here.

"There's not another community that moves at the speed of Ponca City in getting a technical review for companies wanting permits," Lee Evans said.

Ponca City's downtown area continues to experience a decline, representatives of the Central Business District said in the last session of the day.

"The infrastructure is 75 to 100 years old," Main Street director Jayne Detten said.

Private investors have put \$23 million into the downtown area over the past 10 years and another \$10 million in public money has been invested, she said.

"There is a high focus on special events," she said.

Representatives of the Central Business District said they would like to see changes in the function of buildings on Grand Avenue.

Nancy Tyndall suggested focusing on services and professional offices rather than retail. She said there is also a need for restaurants and entertainment.

Several members of the group said they would like to see the downtown area attract more pedestrians.

"I'd like to see people walking around, but there has to be some reason for them to be walking down there," Detten said.

"If our city makes a major investment in a conference center downtown, it would be more inviting for retail businesses to move into some of the empty shops," she said.

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