

Ford County Deemed Least Stressed County in Nation

Below is an article written by John Green that was published in The Hutchinson News on March 26, 2010.

As much of the nation continues to struggle with worsening economic conditions, Dodge City and Ford County are facing their own unique challenges.

The primary one, said Joann Knight, executive director of the Dodge City/Ford County Development Corp., is finding sufficient housing to enable people to come into the community to fill dozens of available jobs.

A close second, she said, is finding the people to fill the jobs.

Ford County, a largely agricultural community that is widely recognized for its "Wild West" heritage, meatpacking operations and the site of the first state-run casino, also drew the distinction this week of being named the least economically stressed county in the nation.

Coming in fifth in the nationwide assessment of counties with more than 25,000 population was neighboring Finney County.

The Economic Stress Index, developed by The Associated Press to analyze conditions around the nation, develops a score based on a county's unemployment, foreclosure and bankruptcy rates. A higher score indicates more stress.

A county is considered stressed, according to the study's authors, when its score exceeds 11. More than 55 percent of counties in the country fell into the category in January.

Ford County, in contrast, with an ongoing unemployment rate under 3.5 percent, had a score of 4.17. Finney County, with an unemployment rate estimated at 4 percent, had an economic stress score of 4.86.

Also in the rankings were Ellis County at No. 2, with a score of 4.31, and Riley County, which was ranked 12th with a score of 5.53.

Destination Ford County

"I think finally somebody is picking up on what we've been telling everybody all along," said Ford County Commission Chairman Kim Goodnight. "We've got a lot of projects going on in our community. We're really trying to create a place where everyone wants to live."

The health of the community, Knight said, goes back to its strong agricultural ties and conservative nature.

That's been boosted by continuing efforts - several dating back more than a decade - to make Dodge City a destination.

"People have to eat, so that's a big part of it," Knight said. "Also, we have a lot of the things going on now that have been in the planning for many, many years. We just finished the casino, which was in the works for almost a decade, and our special events center is now under construction. That dates to 1997, when we passed a vote on it.



(Charlie Riedel/Associated Press file photo) Patrons play craps at the Boot Hill Casino in Dodge City on its opening day. The casino has brought jobs to the region, and agriculture, meatpacking and construction have also contributed to the economic strength of Ford and Finney counties.

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"We also have highway projects that we're able to finish. We just built a jail and we're building a water reclamation facility," she continued.

When the recession hit, most of the projects were ready or nearly ready to start, Knight said, providing jobs for hundreds of construction workers. Now, with the casino complete and the events center on the way, it has meant hundreds of permanent jobs.

The city and county are also working hard to bring a multimillion-dollar cheese factory to the region that would employ 130 to 160 more people. The difficulty, Goodnight said, will be finding people to fill the jobs.

"We have to be attractive enough for someone to want to move here, to get out of the inner city and come out where opportunity is," she said.

"Our biggest issues are recruitment and housing," Knight said. "It's nothing for people to drive 50 miles to come to work. We can find people to work, but we can't find the housing. So that's really been a recent economic development focus."

Her agency has developed regional Web sites to list free job postings and free posts of available housing, she said.

"We have started incentive programs to build new and rehab homes south of Comanche (Street), which is half the community. We're really trying to encourage that growth."

Four months ago the city agreed to offer incentives in helping develop infrastructure for new housing and two months ago adopted a Neighborhood Revitalization Program that offers tax breaks for remodeling.

"We're working with several developers right now, but it's still not enough to meet our needs," Knight said.

The focus is on building apartments after a May 2008 housing assessment showed the greatest need was in the rental market.

Housing projects in the works include the 48-unit Beeson Court six-plexes and nine low-income qualifying duplexes being built by Interfaith Housing Services.

"We've got 350 units in the works with different developers, but not all are at the point they are announceable," Knight said.

Other important factors to its success and attractiveness, Goodnight said, are the region's natural resources.

"Water is our number one resource," he said. "The second thing we have is land and space. And then there are the people. We think all of those are important factors."

And, of course, wind.

"I have my great-great-grandmother's diary, and on the first day it says, 'My oh my, the wind sure does blow,' " Goodnight said. "The county has two conditional permits that have been issued for wind farms. We could easily see another 200-or-so-megawatt wind farms spring up on top of the 100 we have in Spearville."