

A RURAL HOUSING STORY

REPORT

November 2010

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University

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Prepared for:

Rural Development Institute
Brandon University
Brandon, MB R7A 6A9

Prepared by:

Colleen Cosgrove
Freelance Writer
Brandon, MB

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A Rural Housing Story

Whether it's the charm and ease of rural life, a thriving tourism economy or the arrival of hundreds of immigrant workers from near and far, rural communities in Westman are being forced to get creative in order to address their housing needs.

Simultaneously, our baby boomers are aging, the economy is in rebound and more young families are opting out of the daily grind of city life in favour of rural living. In sum, the demand for housing of any sort has reached critical mass for rural Manitoba.

From the construction of condos and apartments to the conversion of heritage buildings and multi-million dollar complexes for seniors, every community, although each at different phases of development, has a plan up its sleeve.

To best address the mounting crunch — and fast — it's evident from the experiences below that residents must take a proactive and creative approach to this complex balancing act; then look to government for assistance.

And as Tom Carter's paper on housing in rural Manitoba outlines, the task isn't easy and it won't be overnight. (*Carter, T. (2010). Housing strategies for immigrants in rural southern Manitoba. Rural Development Institute, Brandon University, Brandon Manitoba.*)

Meantime, rural Manitoba is both blessed and plagued with aging infrastructure and heritage properties just waiting for a reason to be revitalized.

As Carter writes, the number of immigrants arriving in Manitoba has increased dramatically from 3,000 in 1998 to 13,500 in 2009.

Statistics also show that on average, 80 per cent are choosing to stay in-province, and more and more are flocking to the rural way of life in Manitoba.

And with a provincial goal of attracting 20,000 immigrants by 2016, it's clear there is still time to be proactive, and tackle the issues head-on.

So what does this mean for rural Manitoba? To start, jobs are being filled and goods and services are being purchased. Social, ethnic and cultural diversity is being enhanced and Manitoba's global connectivity is expanding.

With little in the way of pre-planned infrastructure, however, communities across the province, particularly in western Manitoba are tackling the issue head-on.

Aging populations, immigration and low-vacancy rates, however, aren't stand-alone issues.

Tourism and a flux in employment opportunities thanks to a boom in the oil patch in the southwestern pocket of the region also pose a challenge, albeit a welcome one.

In the pages below, you will see snapshot of a region rising to the challenge. One that is embracing its individual nuances and using them to move forward and grow and evolve along with its new reality that hey, rural Manitoba is a great place to live.

The below interviews and related information has been edited from copy that originally appeared in the Brandon Sun.

Part One: The Scene Setter

Housing demands know no boundaries: How the villages of Glenboro, Cypress River and Baldur are addressing their housing needs

As baby boomers age and young families flock to the rural life, villages once at risk of blowing away with the prairie wind have been forced to develop local housing strategies of their own.

With a population of just 240, Cypress River found itself in a bit of housing crunch. Farm families and retired folks looking to downsize were facing little in the way of options and many were being forced to move away.

That's when the RM of Victoria's Community Development Corporation stepped up and began sending out surveys to better understand the needs in the area.

"In Cypress River this are no more vacant lots and very little as far as houses up for sale," CDC spokesperson Garry McMannis explained. "This came to our attention ... that what's needed is not so much seniors housing, but any kind of housing."

Encouraged by the positive responses the survey garnered, the CDC set to work on developing a plan using the experiences of neighbouring communities like Holland and Baldur as a model.

"At this point we're looking at a four-plex with a life-lease type of housing," McMannis said. "It will be designated as housing for retired folks."

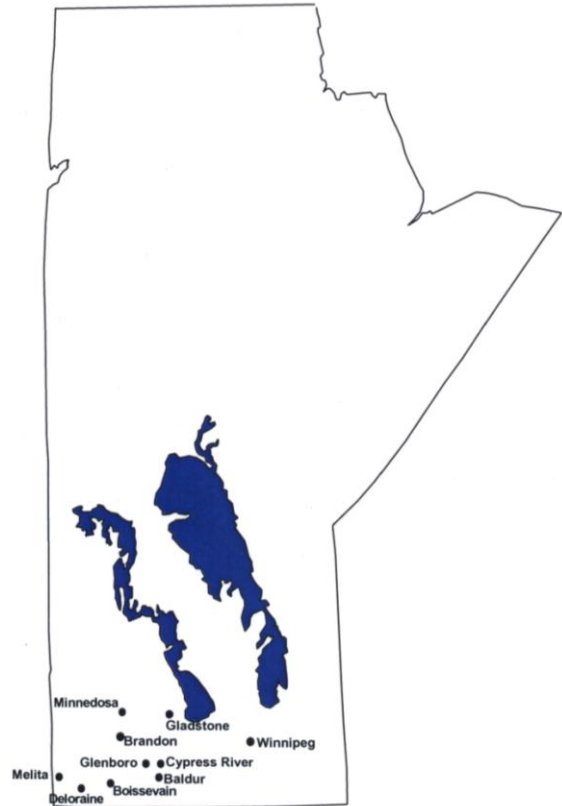
With three potential sites earmarked, the proposed four-plex is moving ahead.

"It's just a matter of getting some plans down on paper and getting some financing in place," he said. "Some of the people involved have a need to move quickly, so we're trying to move this along as fast as possible."

Glenboro

West of Cypress River in Glenboro, a stream of new residents caused a spike in the number of residential permits taken out last year. Seven new permits were doled out and so far, six new homes have sprung up.

The new permits however, mean the community is nearing its residential capacity, CAO Eric Plaetinck said, adding that town council's next challenge will be to look into the creation of a new residential development.



Mayor Bill Shackel says the council is currently scanning town-owned land to determine what is suitable for a new subdivision.

The current inventory of seniors housing is adequate for the time being, but Shackel admits there's always a need for more accommodations for the 55-plus population.

"That's something that's always necessary in an aging community," Shackel said. "We haven't looked at anything along that line quite yet but there is some land that we're keeping an eye on for the near future."

Baldur

Located nearly 30 kilometres southeast of Glenboro is Baldur, the small but mighty community that works together to get ahead together.

Also stricken by a lack of options for its aging population — and the demand from younger generations looking to enter the world of home ownership — a committee of dedicated volunteers has defined a seniors housing initiative.

A three-plex facility is currently under construction and expected to wrap up in November.

"I think Baldur is looking at this as the kind of growth it needed," economic development officer Gayle Lucas said. "Small towns tend to think they're not worth what they really are worth. I'm really hoping this senior housing project will inflate confidence in the community and they'll start embracing more ambitious projects like this."

The three-plex won't satisfy the area's housing needs, but it's a step in the right direction.

"There was a waiting list for the original project ... so I expect we'll probably be doing another project as soon as we recuperate from this one," Lucas said.

Boissevain, a community ahead of the housing crunch

After nearly a decade of planning, the community is getting ready to pave the street of a new 22-lot development. In total, there are about 30 lots for sale within the community, and they are all thanks to visionary thinking well-before it was needed, economic development officer Dale Banman explained.

"It was all forward thinking on the part of council," he said. "About eight to 10 years ago, council saw the opportunity and went ahead with the development in multiple stages. Now, we're ahead of the game and so far, we're meeting the demands."

With a plenty of employment opportunities, and its location 45 minutes south of Brandon, the community is poised for continued growth.

"We're pretty fortunate in terms of our location and the fact that we have a few employers who employ more than 150 people," he said. "We have one of the few schools that's growing and we've seen many young families move to the area recently."

Although anyone looking to build has their pick of available lots, the vacancy rate in Boissevain still hovers at the low end.

"Homes are sold by word of mouth ... there's no chance to even put them on the market," Banman said. "If you're looking to buy a home, you better spread the word well in advance."

As for accommodations for seniors, Banman says that aspect is for now, covered.

“A number of duplexes went up years ago so I think we have a fairly good handle on the seniors-housing aspect of it,” he said. “It’s never perfect, but we’re sitting pointed in the right direction.”

Today, as oil knocks on Boissevain’s doorstep to the west, Banman says the community is continuing with its forward-thinking approach.

“If you want your community to grow, you have to be looking at the future of the region,” he said. “If the spin-off from the oil industry is a part of that, we’ll be ready.”

Part Two: Oil and Tourism

Seniors complex fills niche in Virden

Construction of the Bolton Bay Seniors Complex is taking a bite out of the housing crunch in Virden, but it’s not going to solve the problem, Virden Centennial Housing Corp. spokesperson Doug McLellan says.

VCHC partnered with Manitoba Housing to construct a three-storey condo-style apartment building that features 21 two-bedroom units and 19 one-bedroom suites. Construction is right on schedule, with an opening date set for May 31, 2011.

“It’s not going to be a solution overall, but it does fill a niche,” McLellan said. “There has definitely been some people who were on waiting lists (to get into other senior housing facilities) that have signed a lease with this project, so that’s going to free up some homes in the community.”

Because Virden is a central trading centre, it’s often pinpointed as an ideal community for area residents to retire. Therefore, as the population ages, the demand for seniors and low-income housing is growing, McLellan added.

The non-profit group currently owns and operates the two other seniors complexes in the community. To date, there are more than 140 names and a predicted three- to five-year waiting list to move into the one facility, while another 60 people are on the waiting list for the other.

If the initial success of Bolton Bay is any indication, McLellan expects the project could serve as a positive example for other rural communities and for future developments in the community.

Meanwhile, economic development officer Ed Brethour says the community is also looking for ways to beef up its inventory of rental accommodations.

“We’ve seen the demand for single-family rental units spike recently. Especially since the oil industry and the jobs that relate to it have really taken off,” he said.

Identifying the need is the simple part, it’s finding the balance between the costs of the construction and reasonable rental rates that’s difficult, Brethour added.

“This is the scenario all across rural Manitoba,” he said. “For rentals, what we’re really looking at is side-by-side units. Like a two-storey complex with three-bedroom units.”

Meantime, the newest subdivision in the community is quickly reaching its capacity, but a private developer is said to be developing 10 additional lots adjacent to Bolton Bay in the New Year.

To better understand the community's projected growth and to define its business plan and funding needs, the community will begin working with a developer this fall on a housing needs assessment.

"With the shortness of rental housing right now, it is slowing our growth down a bit, especially when companies are trying to find employees ... If they can't find suitable accommodations here, they'll start looking elsewhere."

Oil boom leads to tight housing

Communities in the southwest corner of the region can thank the oil industry for the jump in both permanent and temporary jobs — and now, for the corresponding increase in the demand for housing.

Residents of Melita, Deloraine and the RM of Pipestone are thankful for what has been an economic boon to the region, and everyone is looking for ways to capitalize on the swarm of potential newcomers before it's too late.

RM of Pipestone Reeve Ross Tycoles says although it's a great problem to have, each community was already dealing with an aging population and a lack of available housing before the boom hit. Now it's a matter of planning fast and acting faster.

"Right now anything that goes up for sale is sold by word of mouth," Tycoles said. "Because things aren't built, a lot of people can't wait six months ... every community has the same thing right now, there's just no housing."

To encourage development, the municipality has seen some success in its municipal lot incentive program, which is designed to reduce the cost of a building permit. In Reston alone, the program has been utilized six times.

"It has helped, but things just aren't happening quickly enough," he said.

Meantime, private developers are getting creative in Reston by refurbishing old unassuming spaces like the former drug store and the Sears depot to create apartment units.

"Anything we can do to keep people here," Tycoles said. "If they don't go here, they go somewhere else so each business, including our schools, hospital and arenas lose out."

Housing for seniors in the area, however, remains at a standstill.

"We don't have the next step of our senior plan in place," he said. "We have to start somewhere, but we need some support from the province to try and meet those demands as well ... We're talking about a project, but that won't come on line until next year."

Southeast of Reston, in Melita and Deloraine, the impact of the thriving oil industry continues.

Melita

About three homes are currently up for sale in Melita, and attempts at developing a multi-phase subdivision are in limbo.

"We've been trying to develop some lots, but that's slow going and extremely expensive," Mayor Bob Walker said. "The site we had in mind for development at the north end of the town ... we had it engineered and had three phases planned, but all of the drainage has to be put and ... it's not even feasible."

A private developer had high hopes to purchase and sell 10 lots for development, but that too is stalled as the property is back up for sale.

With plenty of lots up for grabs and housing of every kind needed — there are three low-rental housing units in town that Walker says are in disrepair and unsuitable to rent — Walker remains hopeful a developer will see the benefit in building in Melita.

“Since the oil activity picked up, we’ve seen tons of young families and kids move to town,” he said. “Unfortunately we’re turning people away. There’s nothing we can do. These people are renting or buying anything around the area.”

To further encourage development, the town is selling vacant lots at reduced prices.

Deloraine

Travelling east to Deloraine, economic development officer Shirley Bell says the housing situation is dire, especially for those looking to rent.

“It’s gotten worse over the last 10 months, especially with the oil development,” she said. “We’ve been monitoring it but the fact is, there’s nothing available in our community.”

Bell also chairs the Southwest Manitoba Regional Immigration Committee and says the lack of housing is inhibiting the organization’s ability to actively promote immigration to the region.

“There’s a workforce shortage in our community, but the lack of rental accommodations is hindering that development,” she said. “We have a lot of young families moving into the community and more young people staying in the community ... I see very positive things, but new construction and housing projects are key components of that.”

The town has recently partnered with a Killarney-based construction company for seniors housing. To date, one two-unit complex is complete and a second is in the works.

“We focused on seniors because it will open up some family housing,” Bell said. “We’ve got to start somewhere.”

Demand grows for housing in Russell

Russell residents are basking in the glow of a thriving tourist economy, but the community is feeling the pinch when it comes to finding homes for everyone.

“It’s certainly a problem, but it’s a good problem to have,” deputy mayor Eldon Montgomery said.

The success of the community’s downtown revitalization; the employment opportunities at the potash mine across the border in Rocanville, Sask., and; the inordinate number of young families who are opting out of life in the (expensive) fast lane in favour of the rural lifestyle is causing the community to feel the pressure on all sides.

With a “decent” rental unit inventory as a buffer zone, the community is addressing the needs of its single-family population, Montgomery says.

A new subdivision, which started out with 11 lots to sell now only has three remaining, and the other half, with 11 more lots, is set to be developed next spring.

An additional parcel of land north of the community has also been earmarked for development, but the project is on hold until another pending project is solidified.

Meanwhile, a local group is also in the preliminary stages of its plans to construct a four-plex for the 55-plus crowd.

“We’re trying to be proactive by encouraging development by having these lots available and ready to go,” he said. “We’re anticipating there’s going to be a great demand for housing across rural Manitoba.”

Although Montgomery prefers council stay out of the business of housing development, he says there are some things council can do to entice developers.

“We need to have the space first,” he said. “We’ve also talked to some companies that sell modular homes ... and we’ve been sniffing around other communities like Altona and Winkler ... and also in Elkhorn, just to see what they’re up to. There’s always lessons to be learned.”

Veteran real estate agent Joan Montgomery says growth in the Russell area is promising, and shows no signs of slowing up.

“It’s an excellent area right now ... definitely a seller’s market. Over half of the homes that sold last year were to newcomers. They were certainly wage earners, so it’s not a retirement population that’s moving in,” she said. “That’s huge for the future of our community.”

Part Three: Immigration and Its Effects on Housing

Minnedosa works on housing strategy

Struck by its dwindling inventory of housing at every level, Minnedosa town council is working on a comprehensive 10-point strategy to better address the community’s housing needs.

The crunch has been mounting for more than three years, but has been exacerbated by the recent immigration increase to the area, deputy mayor and housing committee chair Diane Hartley explained.

“Right now, we want to look at maintaining our existing housing inventory ... and we’re starting to look at some low-income and moderate-income developments,” she said.

“We hope there will be those that will want to move up and it will free up other housing here.”

Although the majority of newcomers are working in Neepawa — a community with a housing crunch of its own — Minnedosa is a popular second choice.

“That’s not the population that’s looking for new housing, but again, if you can move people up into the newer housing, that will free up some affordable housing for those new immigrants,” she said.

Although the need for single-family housing has been confirmed anecdotally, a formal needs assessment was developed in order to help with grant applications and for clarity when approaching developers.

A survey of the community’s existing housing inventory is the second step, part of which has already been completed as part of a heritage home inventory.

Step 3 is the new development based on whatever the needs assessment ascertains is priority, while Step 4 will focus on maintaining the community's core and existing inventory through the potential use of incentive programs to encourage home owners to make upgrades.

Mayor Duane Lacoste says addressing the needs of the senior population is also an important component.

"We're looking at developing a survey ... to get a real idea of what the need is for seniors," he said. "We certainly have a number of seniors from other communities that look to move here ... I think we're meeting the needs right now, but we could for sure use more."

Whatever direction the new development takes, maximizing the community's current inventory is top priority.

As their term in council approaches the end, Hartley, unsure of whether she will seek office again, says the plan is to create a written template as a starting point for the new council.

No quick fix for Neepawa's housing crunch

If Neepawa wants to attract further development, something needs to be done — and fast — to address the housing crunch, CAO Rick Donaldson says.

"Unless we can deal with our housing issue in short-order, we're going to miss out on a lot of opportunity," he said.

A lack of available land to be developed and the tight or non-existent vacancy rate for rental units means there is no quick fix.

"Even if we were to secure land to be developed, that means getting it serviced ... the costs go up there and then the question comes, what do you put there?"

There are two distinct markets Neepawa needs to address in order to further its development, Donaldson says.

"We need the \$200,000 and above market; you can't attract professionals without that type of housing," he said. "And the immediate issue we need to address is we have immigrants who are now qualified to bring their families here ... It's one thing when three or four of them are living in a basement suite or a hotel, but when it comes to bringing their families to town, that's not acceptable."

The Springhill Farms hog processing plant can be thanked for the boost of immigration to the area, but with 100 additional Filipino workers scheduled to arrive late this year, the push is on to find a solution.

A community-based working group made up of business owners and other interested community members has formed in order to brainstorm solutions and ways to entice developers.

Meanwhile, town council has been working toward securing a deal with a developer interested in transforming the now-vacant East View Lodge into a 45- to 60-unit apartment complex.

News of a secured developer for the project is pending and an announcement is expected within the next few weeks.

Housing 'always a challenge' for Carberry

A recent influx of immigrants to the Carberry area prompted the Central Plains Immigration Project to think about what the region was doing well and where it needed improvement.

The housing situation, which economic development officer Laurie Robson describes as “tight at best,” must be addressed if they are to actively recruit families to the area.

“Housing is always a challenge when you’re looking at community growth,” Robson said. “(Carberry) has that challenge with both property available for new builds and also for cost-efficient housing. It’s hard to build something that can be rented out affordably later.”

The rising demand for rental suites and options for first-time home buyers is also putting the pinch on its housing inventory.

“Right now, we’re exploring what other communities have done, or have been trying to do and we are trying to learn from those successes and failures,” Robson said, adding that it’s important the community figure out where the market is headed in the long term before any development takes place.

A private subdivision in town is being developed and its hoped that the people moving there will free up other homes throughout the community.

“That will free up the housing market a bit, but it doesn’t address affordable rental housing,” Robson said. “It’s really a constant pressure on the community.”

Meanwhile, the community can breathe easy when it comes to addressing the housing needs of the 55-plus crowd.

Lyons Estates opened the first phase of a planned three-phase, 48-unit facility two years ago. Currently, 17 rooms are ready to move into and 15 families have moved in.

Developer Les Watts says the original inspiration for the project came three years ago when it became clear there was a lack of similar housing in the area.

“We thought there was a fairly wide area we could draw from, but that’s not the case now,” Watts said. “Every community is coming up with its own version of seniors housing because everyone wants to stay in their own community.”

The less than overwhelming response to Lyons Estates has put Stage 2 of the project on hold, but that’s not discouraging Watts and other investors.

“It’s a solid facility and it’s designed so that it can serve the community and area for years to come,” he said. “It’s just a matter of filling the suites before we can move on. People get older every year so we’re confident that will happen.”

Part Four: Time to Get Creative

Gladstone at a glance

Facing a declining population, Gladstone residents used their creativity to revitalize the community.

Thanks in part to the construction of its 400-person community centre and more than \$8-million investment in commercial infrastructure, the community has gone from downtrodden to triumphant.

New families have moved to town, new housing developments are popping up and the general mood around town has changed for the better.

The real change came when the community joined the Age Friendly Manitoba Initiative, which is aimed at helping communities become better places to live for older adults.

The construction of 10 one- and two-bedroom apartment suites and the restoration of a downtown heritage building to make way for seven additional suites have addressed the community's housing needs.

Instead of waiting on government grants, each project was privately financed by local business owners. And they're already starting to see returns as several new families have moved to town and bought homes that were freed up when residents moved into the new apartments.

Elkhorn group breathes new life into dying infrastructure

House by house, the Elkhorn Development Corp. is doing its part to ensure that the future of the small border town is bright.

Armed with a vision for the future and nostalgic ties to the past, the EDC formed in 2007. Since then, it has successfully tackled the construction of eight new homes, with two more on the way.

The group started its project by purchasing a number of abandoned homes and demolishing them. New homes are now on those lots and the group's efforts are garnering buzz throughout the region.

Conclusion

While not all-inclusive, these stories and experiences demonstrate that whether a community faces an aging population, a spike in industry activity or an increased number of immigrants, a solution to every housing conundrum is possible.

Whether it means using existing infrastructure to accommodate newcomers, rallying government for assistance, or enlisting the help of the community to build something from the ground up — every housing story is a unique one.

While the stories above are ever-changing and as projects move forward to completion, the original message is clear — each community must be proactive and use the bounty of knowledge of their neighbours to find a unique solution that not only caters to their needs, but finds a way to breathe new life into the area, as well.

In sum, it's the creative collaboration of the above experiences that will bring success – and affordable housing for all — to rural Manitoba.