

Leaders from five area towns focus on rural housing

By Seth Tupper

Mitchell Daily Republic

July 8, 2003

ALEXANDRIA - Teams from five area towns will meet tonight at the Alexandria school to discuss the future of housing in rural communities.

The Rural Learning Center, of Howard, organized the gathering as part of a pilot project devoted to rural housing. A second meeting is scheduled for Aug. 5 at Emery, and a third meeting will be scheduled at Ethan.

The participating communities are Alexandria, Emery, Ethan, Fulton and White Lake. Each town has a team consisting of members from their city and county governments, school districts, economic development groups and other interest parties.

Jim Beddow, executive director of the RLC, said the teams will consider a comprehensive range of housing issues, including the condition of current housing and the lack of new and affordable housing.

Solutions could include rehabilitating old housing, as well as developing housing options for rental units, multi-family units, and seniors.

"Community teams are going to develop a profile of their current housing environment - identify opportunities and challenges," Beddow said. "And then we're going to link them to the resources they need to address the things they've identified."

The resources available tonight will include representatives from the South Dakota Housing Development Authority, Fannie Mae, Lutheran Social Services, South Dakota Planning and Development District III, and the Mitchell Area Development Corporation.

The five towns' proximity to the hub community of Mitchell made them prime candidates for the project, Beddow said.

"They're going to be looking at, 'Are we going to be a bedroom community? Are we going to be a retirement community? What do we want to look

like five to 10 years from now, and what can we do intentionally to achieve that vision?' "

The project is one of the first organized by the RLC since its inception just more than a year ago. Two other pilot projects are also under way: one focused on rural entrepreneurship in the northeast corner of the state, and one dealing with county-wide planning and decision making in Jerauld County.

The RLC has secured a \$450,000 grant from the federal government toward the construction of a campus in rural Howard. Plans for the campus and its buildings are in the design stages.

Currently, Beddow operates the RLC out of an office in Howard and shares staff with Miner County Community Revitalization. The rural-housing project is typical of the kind of work RLC will do, Beddow said.

"It's all consistent with our general approach, that we think rural communities can learn from each other and with each other," Beddow said. "They're in a multi-community environment, then they go back home and decide what they're going to do specifically in their communities."

The costs of the housing project are being covered by the East River Electric Power Cooperative and the Central Electric Cooperative, Beddow said. The five teams will meet from 5 p.m. until 9 p.m. today.