

Some downtown buildings will need lots of work

By Andy Heintz

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Rick Patrick, director of the Thomas County Economic Development Alliance, says that revitalization of downtown Colby will require action by owners of some old buildings.

He said a lot of the vacant buildings downtown are full of asbestos and mold and have weeds growing up around them. Patrick said many owners are unwilling to pay what it will cost to fix these problems. He thinks they should fix the buildings up or tear them down.

"Their taking up space on prime real estate," the director said.

Patrick said a group of Colby Community College students wanted to turn one of the vacant buildings downtown into four green apartments, but the owner wouldn't give them the time of day. He said the students had the whole thing planned. The buildings were going to be run partially on solar energy with insulated windows.

"It was a total green project," Patrick said.

The director said he is a fan of the small-business approach to economic development as opposed to courting giant companies. He said you can give big companies a 10-year tax abatement to entice them to move in, but there's always the chance they will move out of the city once the abatement runs out.

"Then the economy is in worst condition than it was before the business moved in," Patrick said.

He said one of the major obstacles Colby faces when it comes to getting young people to come back to the town is a lack of affordable housing. Patrick said not that many homes are available, so people can sell houses for more than what they would otherwise be worth.

He said people are buying houses that are not that great because it's all they can afford. Patrick refers to these people as



Rick Patrick, director of the Thomas County Economic Development Alliance, said while most — like these on Franklin Avenue — are good, some dilapidated buildings will need to be torn down or fixed up to revitalize downtown Colby.

— Photo by Andy Heintz/Colby Free Press

underhoused. The director said someone making \$28,000 a year still couldn't afford a home in Colby.

Patrick said getting businesses to move in to Colby would help fix the housing problem because new businesses would bring new people to town, which in turn would bring in construction companies to build houses for these people. He said this would level the playing field because it would force people who were selling 40-year-old houses for \$140,000 to make their prices more reasonable.

Patrick said this would allow people to buy the homes they want while also making smaller homes affordable to people who previously only had enough to rent. But getting businesses to move in downtown will be challenging until the dilapidated buildings are fixed or torn down, he said.

The director said the alliance is willing to step in and help longtime businesses with a loan if they couldn't get help from a bank. He said people who live and work in Colby are the ones who keep small businesses running downtown.

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