

New director digging in

By Judy Sherard

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Scott Sproul, Norton County economic development director, has been on the job barely a month, but he already knows the impact economic development has on population.

A rural area, he said, must maintain current services while attracting businesses.

With a diverse economy, Norton County has several economic development projects in the works. However, because of the recession, Sproul says he expects most of the new businesses in the immediate future to come from home-grown entrepreneurship business.

Access to quality health care is a key component to keeping a current residents and attracting new ones to an area, he said. Norton County currently has seven full-time doctors, and a renovation project is underway at the Norton County Hospital that will upgrade the facility and services.

Another major project is the grain terminal being constructed by the Ag Valley Cooperative east of Norton.

Even though it has a small population base, western Kansas is an integral part of the state's economy. Grain keeps the economy flowing, he said. So Sproul says he believes it's important to let legislators know

what the area needs. The Promoting Norton County Initiative, formed and financed by county businesses, has hired lobbyists to promote the county's interests in Topeka.

An application has been submitted to the state to have downtown designated an historic district. If the application is approved as expected early next year, businesses may qualify for a tax rebate for some renovations.

Suitable housing is another issue of concern in maintaining or increasing population levels. Though no projects to increase the low inventory currently are underway, Sproul said he is looking for programs that may apply.

Several projects were completed in Norton before Sproul was named to the job. The Washington Street Park downtown, which started with a grass roots movement to replace two buildings, an antique store and one used by the Norton Archery Club, that burned in 2006, and the iron scenes depicting Norton characteristics give the downtown district a unique feel. Work continues on the Norton County Visitor's Center adjacent to the Park.

The Neighborhood Revitalization Plan is a countywide tax rebate incentive program designed to stimulate the economy by encouraging people to improve existing structures and begin new construction. Improvements must meet county guidelines

Norton County trend after hitting its peak

By Harriett Gill

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The population of Norton County has been a subject of conversation since 1872. An area had to have 600 residents before it could be certified as a county.

According to Frank Lockhard's "History of Norton County," on June 21, 1872, N.H. Billings filed a petition dated June 14 in Topeka for certification of Norton County. This petition was so defective that the governor refused to act on it.

Billings was not discouraged; he just wrote another one and filed it on July 3, 1872. This petition was followed by a second one, also dated July 3, which listed inhabitants and householders of Norton County.

"Not one name on the second petition lived in Norton County," Lockhard wrote.

A census was ordered by the governor on

Norton County Population

Population now – 5,345
Population one year ago – 5,330
Population five years ago – 5,799
Population 10 years ago – 5,953
Population 50 years ago – 8,035
Trend – Dropping an average of 54 people a year.

the behalf of the second petition. The census produced 636 names of which 550 had never lived in Norton County, however the county was certified on Aug. 22, 1872, by Gov. James M. Harvey.

Norton County was off and running and the U.S. Census of 1900 showed there were 11,325 residents here; forty years later in

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