



Reporting Points

Special Report

Job openings illuminate Salina housing shortage

Tim Unruh
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A hiring spree has ensued at Big Bertha, the massive airplane hangar near the north end of Salina Regional Airport.

Demand for airline maintenance is growing quickly there as the lone tenant, 1Vision Aviation, is booking so much work that the company roster must grow.



Owner and manager Jim Sponder is scanning the nation, searching for airframe and powerplant mechanics to satisfy the maintenance needs of airline customers who bring passenger jets to Salina for maintenance.

He's also looking to rent more hangar space from the Salina Airport Authority to house his general aviation operations.

With some 75 employed currently, Sponder aims to soon double his employment.

"We need 150 by the end of this month, and 200 by the end of February," he said, and 1Vision is back on track to have 450 people working at the hangar by 2022, as was the hope when the company expanded from Sioux City, Iowa. It launched business here Sept. 1, 2019.

It's an exciting time as Big Bertha once again bulges with people, activity, and aircraft.

But there is a hitch.

"The story I keep getting from everybody coming is they can't find a place to live," Sponder said. "There are no apartments."

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When he moved here in late 2019, Sponder bought a home in Salina, containing several rooms for workers.

With those beds taken, the man with a do-it-yourself attitude, is seeking to fix his own worker housing problem.

“If I could find some land to build apartments, I would do it,” he said.

Local leaders don’t argue his point.

“We know there is need for apartments here,” said Eric Brown, president and CEO of the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce.

“There hasn’t been a market rate apartment complex built in Salina in more than two decades,” he said. “There’s been work toward addressing the housing shortage for several years, but inventory doesn’t just open up in the market overnight.”

Two cases in point are the market-rate Norton Building apartments off East Iron Avenue and the Lee Lofts — a combination of market rate and income qualified apartments — at Santa Fe Avenue and Elm Street.

“They’re all leased up,” Brown said. “We know there is pent up demand for quality housing. There is a hierarchy of needs; food, water and shelter.”

Realtors and landlords won’t argue there is a shortage, and neither will city leaders, who are working on updating a housing plan.

Meanwhile, a shortage persists.

“1Vision has people couch surfing,” said Mitch Robinson, executive director of the Salina Community Economic Development Organization.

“That’s obviously not a long-term solution,” he said. “A lot of apartments built now are either senior oriented or low income.”

Those who deal in real estate are dialed into the issue as well, said Amber Renfro, a Realtor with Coldwell Banker APW, 631 E. Crawford.

“Workforce housing has been at the forefront of our discussion for the last several years,” said Renfro, who has been in the business 21 years in Salina.

“This is something that we’ve always stayed close to, to ensure that our businesses have affordable housing for their labor that allows them to recruit the talent they need,” she said. “One of my roles as a realtor is to work with the businesses and organizations to help showcase what Salina has to offer to their recruits and prospects.”

Despite those efforts, Renfro admits more needs to be done.

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“Availability of workforce housing remains a challenge,” she said. “There is no denying that we are low on housing inventory in certain price points.”

The Chamber has been neck deep in efforts to alleviate the situation.

“We’ve advocated for housing development, been involved in workforce housing, been engaged with Salina Housing Authority, local landlords, developers, private foundations, and all the partnerships that make housing happen in a community,” Brown said, “We’re shining a light on the opportunities that exist in Salina, and needs that could be addressed by housing developers.”

The Chamber has also assisted in making connections, he said, and amassed data points and research information.

With up to 850 jobs coming available soon from three companies — 1Vision, Schwan’s and Great Plains Manufacturing — and more that are in quiet discussions behind the scenes, housing voids are immense.

“What we need is a large-scale building project, and right now it’s just not being done,” Brown concluded.

Robinson said. “It’s not just here in Salina. It’s pretty much across America. What we don’t have is enough builders. We’re not having enough homes built for 200 thousand dollars or less.”

Much work has been done by all of the Salina economic development partners — the Chamber, EDO, Salina Airport Authority, city, county, and others — eager to make this community an attractive place to expand or relocate a business.

“I’ve had conversations with manufacturers such as Salina Vortex, El Dorado National, Coperion K-Tron, the education system, hospital and medical community. and everyone trying to recruit high wage and high-end demand positions to Salina,” Brown said. “To find ourselves in need of housing, hurts our ability to grow the local economy.”

Workforce, or market rate housing, refers to places to live where the rent is not being subsidized, said Lauren Driscoll, the City of Salina’s director of Community & Development Services.

It’s likely that 1Vision workers might find some apartment complexes in Salina attractive, she said, “but they might experience challenges related to income qualification.”

Anybody making 50 percent or less of median income is considered low income, Driscoll added, while those making 50 to 80 percent of the median is at moderate income. Sponder agrees his employees make too much to meet low-income requirements.

“We’ve had some housing challenges, specifically workforce housing — some call it affordable housing. We have different gaps in the housing ladder of the market,” Driscoll said. “I wouldn’t say the city has ignored pushing

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regular housing; more like standing back and waiting to see what the markets would do, and trying to understand the role the city needs to play.”

The City of Salina is working to freshen up its Live Salina strategic housing plan, she said, and finding out what peer cities are using, such as Manhattan, Junction City, or even Des Moines, Iowa.

“We’re updating to get the most current data possible to better understand the picture,” Driscoll said. “We have been approached by developers of all kinds with interest in market-rate housing. One reason these guys are coming to town is they are needing a tax break.”

They seek abatements from property taxes — 10 to 100 percent — for up to 10 years, production inventory taxes, sales taxes for materials, she said, and breaks on building permits.

“Each time you do something like this, you have to look at how they’re being done,” Driscoll said. “The city already has incentives; local, state and the chamber and they all come with disclaimers. Also, what role do we want to play in that? How much do we want to entice them?”

There are programs available, but many target seniors or low income, Robinson said.

“Right now, there is not really a workforce type of assistance program, but there might be something the state or city of Salina can look at,” he said. “There are existing tools in place. We’ve got more tools for homes, but not for apartment buildings. We need both right now.”

Big pictures must be considered.

“You’ve got to think of the long-term effects of something like that, how it affects taxpayers as a whole,” Driscoll said. “When you’re incentivizing housing, what is best, and how does that incentive affect the community?”

Some caution is important, said Brian Richardson, entrepreneur and local developer, referring to overdevelopment in Junction City when the Big Red One returned to nearby Fort Riley a few years back. It left some housing empty.

“You certainly don’t want to get into a situation like that,” he said. “When a builder is putting in 100 or 150 units, that takes a lot of communication with the city, county and chamber.”

As of Jan. 20, Richardson said he had three apartments for rent, ranging from \$595 to \$1,000 a month, but there will be 15 more apartments open, within the next 45 to 60 days in the Lowell School project at 1009 Highland.

He is aware of the opportunities in Salina, with talk of up to 1,200 new jobs coming in.

“Going forward, there’s a problem, even if there are only 600 new jobs,” Richardson said, referring to housing.

“It’s awesome. What’s happening in Salina is not happening in many places in the country. It’s good stuff,” he said. “I’m excited to be a landlord in the community and to be a citizen of Salina for these reasons. I have a

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daughter who has moved home from Kansas City, Mo., and a lot of that is because of what's happening in the community."

It's hoped developers will "seize the opportunity without government assistance," Driscoll said. "In the last six months, we have seen an increased number of inquiries about incentives or property tax abatements by developers looking to do market rate or 'regular' housing. These inquiries have escalated the issues, and conversations about the city's role are happening."

The Salina City Commission is scheduled to discuss the Live Salina Plan update at the Feb. 1 study session. For details, visit the city's website.

"As a community, we've always done our best to support projects with quality wage level positions," Brown said. "We've done that, and now it's time to give workers and job seekers a place to live in order to support our employers in the growth of this community."

Leaders acknowledge it's not always easy to fill voids, Richardson said, but he and others are up for the task.

"Although it's a challenge," he said, "it's good to have it on our plate."

Did You Know?

- Saline County unemployment spiked in April 2020 to 9.6 percent, and improved to 3.4 percent in December, said Eric Brown, president and CEO of the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce.