

Housing grant

Fairmont receives \$273,000 for home improvements.

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Weekend Tribune

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U.S. extends home buyer tax credit

AREA BROKER SAYS
STIMULUS PLAN HAS HELPED
SPARK REAL ESTATE SALES

JOHN HUTHMACHER

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An extension of the federal government's 2009 tax credit stimulus for first-time home buyers to April 30 is likely to give the local real estate market a boost.

The extension, which was signed into law on Oct. 6, includes both an \$8,000 credit for first-time home buyers and a \$6,500 credit for existing homeowners purchasing another home. Only homeowners who have lived in their primary residence for at least five of the last eight years qualify

for the homeowner credit.

Those taking advantage of the first-time tax credit must be first-time home buyers who intend to occupy the home for at least three years. If the home is sold prematurely, the tax credit must be repaid.

The amount credited is 10 percent of the purchase price and is capped at \$8,000. Those purchasing homes costing more than \$80,000 will receive the same \$8,000 credit.

Bob Poppe, a broker at Gateway Realty in Hastings, said Tuesday that the tax credit has indeed impacted the local market in terms of homes sold.

"There have been a number of sales in that \$80,000 range," Poppe said. "That's probably the most active price range right now. That tells me that's

where the interest is, and a big share of it is coming from this tax credit."

Poppe said he thinks the extension is likely to keep area real estate agents busy throughout the usually cold winter months.

"That's generally the slowest selling time of year," he said. "Maybe that's why they put it in, to spur things during the winter. The \$8,000 credit has been a real plus."

Susan Poppe is a longtime Hastings resident who serves as office manager at Hastings Community Foundation. She said the tax credit she received on the purchase of her home at 2718 Bateman Ave. in September has helped make her monthly budget a lot easier to manage.

Please see CREDIT/page B2



JOHN HUTHMACHER/Tribune

First-time home buyer Scott Hansel relaxes in the home he bought in August 2009. Hansel received almost \$8,000 in federal stimulus refund money tax credit after amending his income tax return.

Red, WHITE and blue



BRENT McCOWN/Tribune

A large snow drift almost reaches the top of a flag pole at a farm three miles north of Juniata on Alda Avenue Friday. South central Nebraska might get a break next week with temperatures forecast around 30 degrees and sunshine.

Utter bill would eliminate treasurer

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Sen. Dennis Utter of Hastings plans to introduce a legislative bill Monday that would abolish the state treasurer's office.

"Since I've been in the Legislature, I've been looking for ways to reduce the size of state government. It's been too big," Utter said late Friday.

Utter plans to introduce the legislative resolution for a constitutional amendment Monday to remove the office of state treasurer. The goal, he said, is to save money and downsize government.



Utter

"When I look at the treasurer and what he does, some things are redundant and could be transferred to other offices and divisions of the state," Utter said.

Since the state treasurer is a constitutional office, Utter said, the bill would have to pass three readings of the Legislature and go before a vote of the people in November before a change could be made.

The proposed resolution would call for the abolishment of the office effective Jan. 1, 2013.

That means the new treasurer, who is to be elected this November, would only serve a four-year term. State Treasurer Shane Osborn announced in September that he would not be seeking a second term.

Please see UTTER/page A6

Sex offender list changes

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Although the number of sex offenders seen on the Nebraska State Patrol's Web site has tripled, that increase doesn't indicate a growing problem in the state.

Dan Furman, the Adams County Sheriff's deputy who tracks sex offender registrants in Adams County, said Thursday that it's just a difference in publication.

"I think, for a period of time, it will be a shock to the public to realize just how many have always been out there," he said. "We went from 19 published sex offenders who were Level 3 to today, when we had 60 on our Web site. They have always been living here."

In Nebraska, sex offenders had been broken into three categories, corresponding to a risk to re-offend assessed by the state patrol. Only Level 3 offenders — at the highest risk to re-offend — were published on the Web site.

Under the new state law that went into effect Jan. 1, the risk levels have been removed and all offenders are published on the Web site. Instead of levels,

Please see LIST/page A6

City will have to revise law

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The city of Hastings will have to make some changes of its own now that new laws regarding the state's sex offender registry have taken effect.

In August 2006, the Hastings City Council adopted a 500-foot residency restriction ordinance prohibiting Level 3 sex offenders from living near schools or child care facilities.

Level 3 offenders were classified as those considered the most likely to re-offend who were convicted after Jan. 1, 1997, when the public Nebraska Sex Offender Registry was enacted.

Changes to the registry that took effect Jan. 1 removed the three levels of offenders, making the city's residency restriction invalid.

Hastings City Administrator Joe Patterson said the council soon will

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Snapshot of 500-foot ordinance



Downtown's 'whole combo' inspires other communities

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Downtown Hastings has undergone a transformation in the last 20 years that community leaders from across the state have started to notice.

"We've had some really good projects in the last five or six years in terms of cool stores, store fronts, businesses, upper-level living, the whole combo. And the word has gotten out a little bit," said Randy Chick.

Chick, who serves as director of both the Business Improvement District and the Community Redevelopment Authority, spearheads many of these downtown projects.

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Weather

Hi: Sunny and bitterly cold today. Clear and cold tonight.

11

Lo: 5



Art by Dakota Cherney, 9, Thayer Central

AIRPLANES DIVERTED

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo.

— Disruptive passengers caused two commercial airplanes to be diverted Friday, with military jets scrambling to escort a San Francisco-bound flight into a

Nation

Colorado airport, authorities said.

Two F-16s were launched at 11:44 a.m. to catch up with AirTran Airways Flight 39 from Atlanta to San Francisco after a report that an intoxicated passenger had locked himself in a bathroom, the Colorado-based North American

Aerospace Defense Command said.

The jets arrived over Colorado Springs Airport as the captain — who AirTran said had decided to divert the plane — landed there around noon, NORAD spokeswoman Stacey Knott said.

The Associated Press

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Utter: Hastings senator proposes abolishing state treasurer's office

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Utter said he knows that the treasurer's office performs several important functions. However, he believes those duties could be completed by other state offices including the Department of Revenue, the Department of Administrative Services, the Secretary of State or the state auditor.

As such, he also believes the 50-60 employees in the treasurer's office could be absorbed by the offices that take over the treasurer's duties.

With some of those employees being absorbed into other offices and staying on the state payroll, Utter admits that this change wouldn't mean a major reduction in costs for the state. Still, he said, it's a place to start.

"While this isn't something that represents big bucks at all, it's a start toward downsizing and making state government more efficient," he said.

Utter said that he and Sen. Galen Hadley of Kearney have been working on this bill for several months. And, Utter said, he may have at least a few other senators jumping on board as

co-sponsors on Monday, when he plans to introduce the bill.

There may be some opponents to the bill out there, but Utter said he believes that many senators will support the concept.

"I think that it is the mood of the Legislature that we need to do some things that result in savings and move us toward being more efficient than we are now," he said. "Honestly, this just happens to be the first step."

Utter said other senators have expressed interest in other ways to downsize and save money for the state. Some of those may come out in the form of bills introduced in the next week.

"I'm sure folks will come up with good reasons to keep it, but if you're interested in reducing the size of state government, streamlining and making it more efficient and accountable, this is a place to start," Utter said.

"I think it will be a great test for Nebraskans to see if they're willing to do these things," he said. "It won't save big bucks but it will save bucks and you've got to start somewhere."

List: Changes made to sex offender registry

Continued from page A1

the severity of their crimes will affect the amount of time an offender is listed on the registry. Offenders convicted of crimes punishable by less than a year in jail will be listed for 15 years. Perpetrators facing more than a year in prison will be listed for 25 years and any convictions with extenuating circumstances require lifetime registration.

Schools, child care facilities and other organizations no longer will receive notification about the address changes of registrants on the list. Before the new law, Furman said such organizations were told about any moves made by offenders considered at moderate- or high-risk to re-offend.

Members of the public who want to stay attuned to the whereabouts of sex offender registrants will need to check the registry Web site at www.nsp.state.ne.us/sor. In addition, Furman said a list of offenders in Adams County is available at the sheriff's office during business hours.

He said keeping up to date on the registry will require regular checks and visitors to the Web site can expect frequent changes.

"We've had five this month already," he said.

While the new law may require more paperwork to track offenders, Furman said it won't be too much of a burden on law enforcement.

Offenders now are required to visit the local sheriff's office to verify identity and residency, including all frequented addresses, work and school locations, travel documents, DNA, fingerprints and palm prints, according to the state patrol's Web site.

Furman said the law removed a recommendation for local law enforcement agencies to verify addresses, but he will continue

to do so.

"Our sheriff here in Adams County is still going to have me go out and physically knock on doors randomly to verify the addresses," he said.

While not required, he said the checks help make sure offenders are living where they say they are. The state patrol used to verify addresses by sending a letter to the registered address that needed to be returned within 10 days, but Furman said the letters could be sent back by anyone.

Another concern from the public has been the proximity of some of the recently published offenders.

Furman said simply knowing where sex offenders live won't protect children; parents need to remind children to be cautious of strangers.

"My advice is the same as it's always been: We always need to teach our children to be vigilant, to know good and bad, to not speak to strangers, to never go into someone's house or take a ride from anybody," he said. "That's something we always teach our children in our stranger danger programs."

From the sex offender point of view, the new law is concerning because low- and moderate-risk offenders are now publicized and more closely associated with those deemed most likely to re-offend.

Some offenders claim to have been taken by surprise with the new law because they didn't receive a certified letter from the state patrol about the changes. Furman said he has a list of local offenders who didn't pick up their certified letter and he plans to visit each to inform them of the changes.

"I will go out and make sure everyone knows," he said. "We want them to come in like they are supposed to."

Law: Hastings will have to revise restrictions

Continued from page A1

address changes to the ordinance to protect its citizens.

"We're currently working at how this will affect the current ordinance," he said. "We should know more soon."

Patterson said City Attorney Bob Sullivan is doing research to determine what needs to be done to revise the ordinances.

Sullivan could not be reached for comment as to the specific changes would be made.

In addition to the residency restriction, the council also adopted a loitering ordinance to address concerns about sex offenders watching children at the Aquacourt Water Park and other parks throughout Hastings.

Under this ordinance, sex

offenders aren't allowed to knowingly loiter in any city park or public way within 300 feet of a city park or school. They can still enter the parks under the ordinance; they just can't loiter there.

By definition, loitering is standing or sitting idly on or around the premises.

The loitering ordinance affects all people who have been convicted of any sex crime against a child at any point in their lifetimes.

For both the residency restriction and loitering ordinance, the minimum fine is \$250 and the maximum is \$500. Because they are city ordinances and not state or federal laws, no jail time can be given.

Downtown: 'Whole combo' impresses visitors

Continued from page A1

He also spends part of his time leading tours for business leaders from other Nebraska communities.

Just in the last few years, Chick has given tours to leaders from at least 12 communities and managers with the Nebraska Main Street program, which helps to promote growth in the downtown area of communities.

On these tours, Chick shows off some of the commercial, residential and mixed-use buildings in the downtown area, hitting spots like the Farrell Block building, the mixed-use residence of Jeb Brant and some of the many eclectic businesses.

A group of business leaders made the trip to Hastings from Norfolk a few weeks ago and needless to say, they liked what they saw.

"There were six of us and I would say every person was impressed, to say the least, in the efforts in Hastings," said Chris Amundson, a member of the Norfolk Vehicle Parking District board.

Amundson and another business leader flew the contingent to Hastings to get some ideas on how to continue to rejuvenate their own downtown.

While the Norfolk downtown is slowly becoming a more prominent place in the community once again, Amundson said the group felt they were at a point where they needed some fresh ideas.

Amundson said the group was impressed with the way Hastings has a set plan for downtown redevelopment rather than the haphazard manner in which many communities set about redevelopment.

Chick credits that to the tools of the CRA and the planning and programming of the BID, which work together on many projects, like the facade improvement program.

"But it's those property and business owners who have reinvested in the downtown who are the heroes," he said. "They're the ones who have really made this thing a springboard in the last five, six, seven years."

Amundson said his group was impressed with the way the CRA buys downtown buildings and takes applications from potential buyers before selling them for use.

"There's a vision in Hastings and it's looking down the line 10 to 15 years," he said. "It's, 'What do we want our community to look like many years from now?' That on the outset is what is most impressive."

Currently the CRA is rehabilitating an old three-story building on Hastings Avenue between First and Second streets into three separate condos.

The authority also is selling another storefront at 817 W. Second St. to Dale and John Hamburger with Carmichael Construction, who plan to create both residential and commercial condos.

And next door, the old Sitel building is also up for sale by the CRA.

That's the building where the Norfolk contingent saw the sign indicating that the CRA was accepting proposals for use of the building.

"That's pretty cool," Amundson said of the sign.

The idea of the upper-level housing and condos downtown is something the Norfolk group also liked.

"They're talking about making a condominium association. This is pretty cool stuff that's done in big cities like Chicago or Kansas City," Amundson said.

"And to think small-town Nebraska is doing this," he said. "It's being creative in the way that we solve community problems as well as improve our community. That was really neat to see."

Now with the ideas in hand, the Norfolk group has gone back home to start making dreams a reality in their own downtown.

They have already made plans to hire someone like Chick to spearhead these projects.

"As the group, we filled our tool box with a new arsenal of tools to improve our community," Amundson said. "It gave us some inspiration to see that certain things can be done and it gave us the inspiration to see we can overcome problems by being creative."



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