

# Better to Be Safe than Sorry

## 'Safe Rooms' Will Protect Riley Countians against Tornadoes

By Larry Freeze

As another tornado season approaches, Kansans can do one of two things -- pray or prepare.

While prayer has its benefits, some civic leaders in Riley County have decided to do more. Several new construction projects are being built with "safe rooms" -- reinforced concrete shelters that can withstand 250-mile-per-hour tornadic winds.

This construction boom began when Riley County was selected to take part in "Project Impact", which is a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) national initiative to reduce the impact of future disasters on individuals, businesses and communities.

Riley County was designated as the first Project Impact community in Kansas. Along with this designation came a grant from FEMA. Formal signing ceremonies were held last June.

"Partnerships with local organizations; city, county and state governments; and with business and industry are the foundations for building this disaster resilience," said Dori Milldyke, Project Impact Education Coordinator.

"Experience has shown that for every dollar spent in disaster mitigation, two dollars is saved in post-disaster relief," she said.

Grants of \$1,000 are available in Riley County for construction of a safe room in any new home. A \$2,000 grant can be made for a safe room constructed in an existing residence. Up to \$3,000 is available to low to moderate-income individuals for construction of a safe room in an existing home.

Several safe rooms have already been completed in Manhattan. Jankord Construction built a safe room in a new house at 3005 Pinewood Circle. D&R Construction completed a safe room as an addition to an existing residence at 700 Gillespie Drive. And a safe room is being completed at 1020 Yuma as part of a house being built by Habitat for Humanity.

The biggest cluster of safe rooms is currently in progress at 2121 Meadowlark Road. That's where five duplex buildings are under construction at the Meadowlark Hills Retirement Community.

Getting the safe rooms installed at Meadowlark Hills was due to the suggestion of Bob Mills. He and his wife Mary plan to move into one of the units when it is completed. Mills had read an article about safe rooms and contacted Meadowlark Hills officials about the possibility of incorporating this safety feature in the new units.

Mathew Loyd, Director of Development at Meadowlark Hills, said Riley County was receptive to the idea. And so were most of the residents who will move into the new duplexes. Nine of the 10 owners are having safe rooms installed.

"We are receiving a \$1,000 grant per safe room at Meadowlark Hills," Loyd said. Although the actual cost is about \$3,500 each, nine of the 10 residents are paying the difference to add this safety feature, he said.

**THE SAFE** rooms at Meadowlark Hills will measure eight feet by six and one-half feet, with six-inch thick reinforced walls. The rooms will be part of large walk-in closets in the units. They will be painted concrete on the interior and have sheet rock applied on the exterior with a heavy steel door.

Mills thinks building safe rooms is only common sense. "I think everybody who has a one-story house should consider it, even if you have a basement," he said.

Monty Wedel of the Riley County Planning, Zoning and Development office, says Meadowlark Hills won't be the last of the safe room projects.

"\$130,000 has been allocated over a three-year period," he said. "And we've spent \$27,000 so far. Twenty-four rooms have been funded, including two Habitat for Humanity units."

To insure that Project Impact continues to be a long-time project, a 12-member volunteer steering committee oversees the program. It is comprised of city, county and Kansas state University personnel, plus members from community organizations and the general public. Among involved organizations is Bluestem Electric Cooperative, Wamego.

To learn more about Project Impact, contact Dori Milldyke at 785/537-2180.