by Kurt Johnson

State officials announced Friday that Aurora is not among the future locations of the Department of Health and Human Services' four new customer service centers.

Though the community survived several rounds of preliminary cuts in the past year and was listed as a finalist, state officials gave the nod to Lexington, Scottsbluff, Lincoln and Fremont. The Lexington assistance center will include 50 employees, while the Scottsbluff and Lincoln projects will employee 100 each. Fremont was the big winner, with a facility expected to employ 150 people.

Christian Evans, executive director of the Aurora Area Chamber & Development, said the site selection process was a learning experience.

"Our proposal was based on building a new structure to house HHS, whereas I believe at least two of the sites chosen are existing buildings that will be utilized," he noted. "With budget cuts and tough economic conditions, I'm sure cost played a very large part of the decision."

And even though Aurora was not chosen for an HHS site, Evans said there were valuable lessons learned during the process.

"It was a great experience to have made it to the list of finalists and I appreciate all the local community members who helped us along the way," he said. "We'll use the knowledge we've gained on this HHS project for opportunities like it in the future to be more successful."

The customer service centers are the third phase of ACCESSNebraska, an effort to modernize

service delivery through increased use of technology, changes in policy and other work efficiency improvements. The first two phases were the ability to apply for services online and document imaging (electronic scanning, storing and retrieving of documents).

"Moving to customer service centers creates a single phone number that people all across the state can call for services," said Kerry Winterer, CEO of DHHS. "I know we can all work together to get people the services to which they are entitled more efficiently and effectively."

Economic assistance services include several federal and state programs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, SNAP (formerly known as food stamps), Medicaid, child care, Aid to Aged, Blind and Disabled (AABD), and the Nebraska Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.