



LOCAL

Tiny Climax Springs, Mo., may vote itself away

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Come August, the town of Climax Springs, Mo. — population about 100 — may vote itself out of existence. Dissolution of the town into surrounding Camden County is expected to be up for a vote by residents. The

hope is that the county will take over maintenance of the roads. Eugene Dority, the village's former road commissioner, is one of the few residents who thinks Climax Springs shouldn't dissolve. "After it does happen, they'll regret it," he predicts. Here is his home; he has a plot of land where miniature mules and ponies graze. Dority also used to have a salvage business. JILL TOYOSHIBA JTOYOSHIBA@KCSTAR.COM



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CLIMAX SPRINGS, MO.

In nearly every regard, Eugene Dority seems like a most agreeable fellow.

At 74, the longtime resident of this tiny northern Ozarks town smiles easily and often, wears coveralls and a cowboy hat. He has an expansive plot of land where miniature mules and ponies graze. And in his wallet, he keeps a fake driver's license that features a picture of Bill Clinton along with a number of Monica Lewinsky jokes.

But since a local woman spearheaded a widely supported effort to dissolve the 100-or-so-resident town, Dority has become something of an anomaly in Climax Springs: a holdout.

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When Kathy Henderson submitted a petition to the Camden County clerk's office recently seeking to dissolve the town, she wrangled the signatures of nearly all of its 55 registered voters. Many in Climax Springs have been vocal in their support of dissolution, including the town's self-described mayor, who last week called it a necessary, if not particularly pleasant, choice.

The county is now expected to put the measure on the next ballot, scheduled for August, and assuming it garners enough support, the town — formed a century ago, in 1915 — will officially cease to exist.



Come this August, it's possible that Climax Springs, Mo., population about 100, May vote itself out of existence. Dissolution of the town into surrounding Camden County is expected to be up for a vote by residents. The hope is that the county will BY MCCLATCHY

The reasons behind the petition are practical enough. Recently the town's leadership has dwindled, with only two of the five trustee positions filled. And through dissolution, responsibilities for road maintenance — which many locals say the town cannot afford on its own — would be transferred to the county.

The battle for Climax Springs' future, if it can be called that, has remained a civil one. Still, as August approaches, the potential for change has brought about a nostalgic mix of emotions — even from some of those in support of the measure.

Generations of families have called Climax Springs home, after all, and even if the town's extinction brings about some needed county assistance, the dissolution of a town brings with it the potential loss of an identity.

As Dority put it, standing on the Coulter Drive property he's owned for more than 40 years, "When you've got a community and no town, what have you got?"

There was a time when Climax Springs was a bustling little place — or at least as bustling as a town its size can be.

It once boasted a hotel, a movie theater, two restaurants, a couple of feed stores. On Saturday nights, it wasn't uncommon to see dozens out and about, and the town also maintained its own legend: to some, the waters of the local spring offer special healing powers.

Like many small towns, however, time eventually took a toll.

Today, Climax Springs sits on less than a square mile of land in Camden County. According to multiple residents, there is only one remaining business within city limits, and with 124 residents at the last census, it represents the smallest town in the county.

The idea to dissolve the village's incorporation, meanwhile, is one that began taking shape years ago.

"(Henderson) has spearheaded this many times," says Camden County clerk Rowland Todd, "and finally got it to go forward."

After initially agreeing to an interview with The Star, Henderson — a friendly, outspoken woman — decided that she'd be reserving comment until after the election. This was her eighth attempt to dissolve Climax Springs, she explained, and she didn't want to rock the boat before it became official.

According to Todd, however, the motivation behind the measure stems largely from the town's roads, many of which are dirt or gravel.

Currently, maintenance of those roads is handled largely by Dority, the one-time roads commissioner of Climax Springs.

Though he regularly takes a motor grader through the town, evening the surfaces as best he can and clearing snow in the winters, he doesn't draw any kind of salary.

The move to dissolve isn't unprecedented. Back in 2012, residents in Macks Creek — a town in the same county with 200 to 300 people — voted to disband for similar reasons. Some residents had grown displeased with the maintenance of local roads, and 69 percent of locals eventually elected to dissolve, according to the Lake News in Camdenton.

Standing outside her home last week, Shawna Scrivener, a Climax Springs trustee, described the push as a necessary move for the town.

Scrivener's family has become something of a Climax Springs political dynasty. Her mother, Wanda Wilson, was a longtime trustee until health issues forced her out of the job, and Scrivener has since picked up the slack; she and her husband are the town's two remaining trustees.

Like many locals, she has fond memories of growing up here, where kids are allowed to roam freely.

At the same time, her foray into the local political scene has taught her that it takes a good amount of work to help run a town, and she conceded that most locals have agreed that the dissolution is something that needs to occur.

"I hate to see it happen," she says. "But sometimes you've got to make choices that are hard to benefit the people."

Although the town's dissolution appears likely — if not in the August election, then during the following one — any significant changes to everyday life are expected to be minimal.

Yes, it will lose its official name. And the town's annual fireworks show, Scrivener says, will likely become a casualty.

But in most respects, it'll be the same old Climax Springs.

"We're still going to say, 'Yeah, we're from Climax Springs,'" says Nathan Barb, superintendent of the Climax Springs R-4 school district. "Whether it's identified as a town or not."

Some, too, think the dissolution could be the first step in paving the way for even greater improvements to the area.

Jack Hammond, a maintenance worker with the local school district, has been a strong proponent of the dissolution. His family goes back "four of five generations" in Climax Springs — his great-granddad once ran the hotel — and he believes that the town can regain some of its former mojo.

Not long ago, he persuaded an aunt to purchase a building in the square, where she hopes to run a shop, and he thinks that by injecting some time and money into the square, it's possible to reverse the decline that has afflicted the town in recent decades.

And it starts with the dissolution.

"The roads will be better, it'll be cleaner," Hammond says. "It'll benefit everybody."

Back on Coulter Drive, however, Dority remains unconvinced.

His roots in the area run deep. His great-granddad used to be justice of the peace for the town. His parents are buried just a few miles outside of Climax Springs. His little brother literally helped build the place — working on the construction of the school a few decades back. There's even a local street named after him: Dority Road.

"I don't know if I'd like you to take a picture of that," he jokes to a visiting reporter, "because the sign right above it says 'Nut Hill.'"

The battle for Climax Springs' future hasn't devolved into a contentious one. As Dority points out, he's still friendly with Henderson, the one who gathered the necessary signatures and submitted the petition to the Camden County clerk's office.

To Dority, Climax Springs is simply home. And he worries that the county won't provide as much assistance as residents are hoping, that it'll end up hurting the town more than it helps.

"I think it's probably going to happen," Dority says of the dissolution. "But I think after it does happen, they'll regret it."

Even if the county does take over the town, though, he plans to maintain his old duties on the roads. He'll keep an eye on the work done by the county, he says, and if a call from a resident with a road issue comes in, he'll still be there to offer his assistance.

Of course, he adds, with the hint of a smile, "if they signed the petition, I probably won't do it."

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