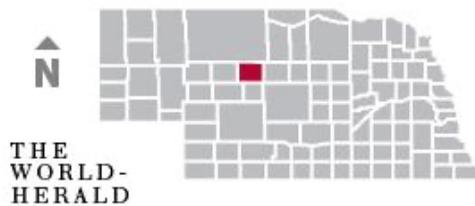




INCORPORATED IN 1888

'Nobody wins here': Tiny village of Seneca ceases to exist – and the end comes with last-minute bitterness



Seneca, Nebraska





These horses are clean and well-fed now, but last winter, their condition prompted ... ▲

By Paul Hammel / World-Herald Bureau

Jul 2, 2014



LINCOLN — Nebraska has lost a town.

The tiny Sand Hills village of Seneca, just west of the line that divides the Central and Mountain time zones, ceased to legally exist as of 11:59 p.m. Monday.

But the demise of the 126-year-old village, which came after a 17-16 vote in a May election, didn't come without last-minute acrimony.

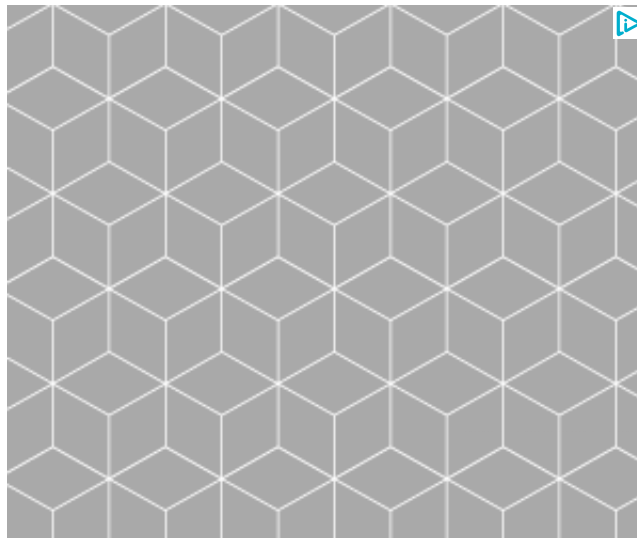
A couple of Seneca supporters who wanted the town to remain an incorporated village claim that they were denied their day in court.

They maintain that the Thomas County Board moved quietly — and more quickly than necessary — to dissolve Seneca before their scheduled hearing before a judge Tuesday.

After a last-minute plea to delay the dissolution was rejected by the County Board on Monday, a group of Seneca supporters withdrew their lawsuit that had contested the residency of a woman who they said cast the deciding vote and the legitimacy of the petitions that led to the special election.

“It’s a difficult pill to swallow,” said Larry Isom, a member of the now-defunct Seneca Village Board. “I still don’t think the election was fair and balanced.”

It’s been a rocky road in Seneca in recent months, after a controversy began over what to do about six emaciated horses in a small pen within the village. It culminated with supporters of the horse owners collecting enough signatures to put the future of the village up for a vote — a vote won by those who wanted to unincorporate and be governed by the Thomas County Board, instead of a village board intent on ridding the town of the horses.



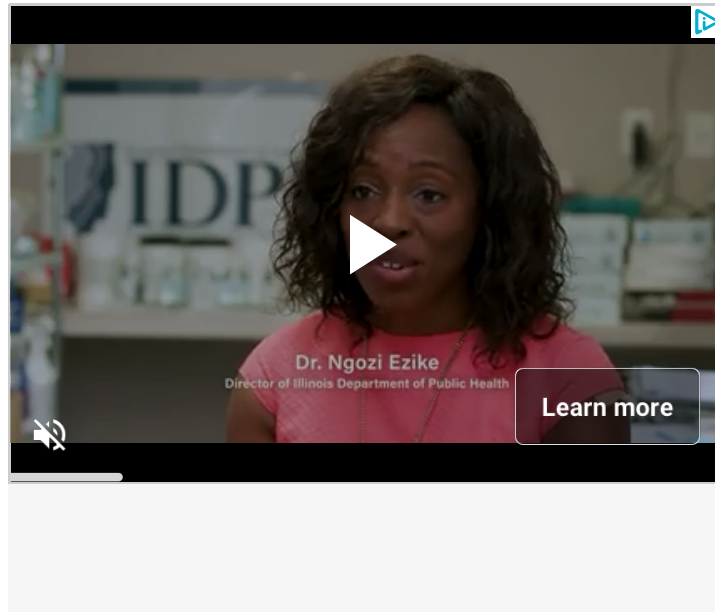
Nebraska now has 529 incorporated cities, towns and villages — legal communities that have governing councils that can levy taxes, receive state funds and decide how to maintain streets.

Seneca, which sits on the banks of the Middle Loup River with a row of scenic Sand Hills as a backdrop, was incorporated in 1888. It once vied to be the Thomas County seat, and it was an important stop on the Burlington Northern Railroad line.

Railroad crews once changed shifts in Seneca, as trains made their way across the lightly populated prairies, according to railroad historian Mike Bartels of Lincoln. (The crew-shift point is now at Ravenna, where an all-night cafe and motel-like barracks accommodate the bustle of railroaders jumping on and off trains.)

A member of the Thomas County Board, as well as the

county clerk denied that there was any funny business involved in the scheduling of the meeting that finalized the town's demise.



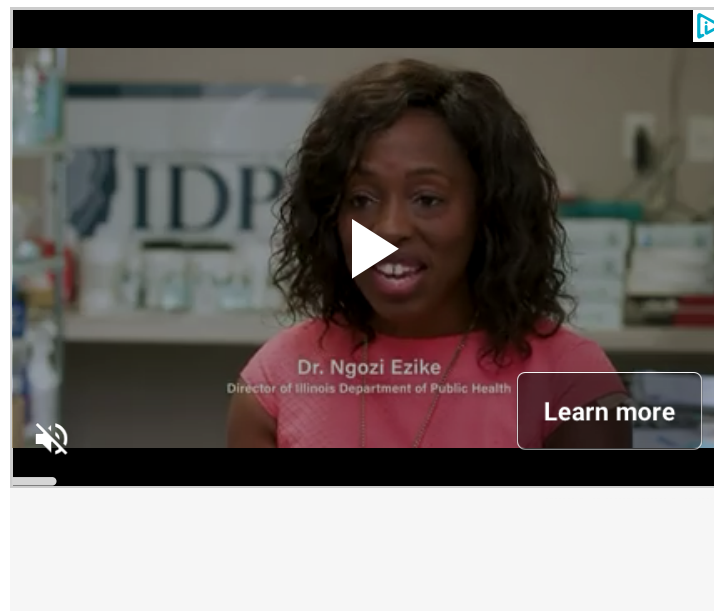
Thomas County Clerk Lorissa Hartman said that, originally, the board had decided to vote Tuesday on when to dissolve the village. By state law, the board had 50 days after the vote to decide when to dissolve the village, and Tuesday was the 50th day after the May 13 vote, Hartman said.

But two of the three County Board members had scheduling conflicts Tuesday, so the meeting had to be moved. Hartman said that since it had not been determined if a new meeting could be scheduled before the 50th day, the decision was moved to June 17.

That's when the board voted to dissolve the village effective at midnight Monday, on the eve of the scheduled court

hearing.

Isom, the Village Board member, and Jackie Sevier, an artist who lives just outside of town, said they were caught by surprise by the change in the decision day. Both said they hadn't learned about it until reading the local newspaper earlier this week.



Because Seneca had already ceased to exist a few hours prior to the court hearing, Isom said, he and three other Seneca village officials dropped their lawsuit. He said they couldn't halt the unincorporation of Seneca because it had already happened.

And, Isom said, it would have cost him and the three other Seneca supporters who brought the lawsuit several thousand dollars more to continue their legal fight. "It was pointless for us to go to court," he said, estimating that their

legal bills and court fees are already several thousand dollars.

Isom admitted that he was partly to blame. He said he could have checked with the county clerk and discovered that the meeting date had been changed and the matter was on the June 17 agenda. Such agendas are posted at the courthouse in Thedford, 15 miles away, and on the county website.



Three felony cases associated with the Seneca unincorporation vote will proceed but are not expected to reverse the town's demise. Two people are charged with falsely claiming that they were qualified to vote, and another maintains that a petition circulator falsely swore that she had witnessed people signing the petitions.

A member of the Thomas County Board, Norma Butler of Thedford, said she sympathized with the plight of Seneca, but she had little choice but to move forward with dissolving

the town.

She said she would have felt the wrath of county taxpayers if she had voted to delay the demise of the town, because the county would have continued to pay the bills to keep streetlights burning in Seneca.

As it stands, the board is scheduled to meet July 15 to decide when to turn off the streetlights and how to dispose of maybe \$50,000 in Seneca property that the county inherited. It includes a community hall that volunteers recently restored through donations of time and money. The county also gets about \$26,000 from the village's bank account.



Butler said most small towns are fighting for survival, and residents band together to keep their community going. It's discouraging, she said, when a village decides on its own to pack it in.

A force of nature refined in luxury.
2021 Maserati Levante. Starting from \$78,290*



be mad at each

other until they die," Butler said. "You wish you could wave a magic wand and make it all go away."

Contact the writer: [402-473-9584](tel:402-473-9584),
paul.hammel@owh.com

[View on Omaha.com](#)



[Hansen: How tiny Seneca, Nebraska – torn apart by bitterness – voted itself out of existence](#)

[OWH archives: Swan song or resurrection? Tiny Seneca struggles for survival](#)

[World-Herald editorial: Dispute ends village's story](#)

Tags

[Larry Isom](#) [Seneca](#) [Thomas County Board](#) [Law](#) [Legislation](#) [Lawsuit](#) [County Clerk](#)
[Jackie Sevier](#) [Lorissa Hartman](#)

 [comments](#)

[⬆ back to top](#)



© Copyright 2021 Omaha World-Herald, 1314 Douglas St., Suite 1500 Omaha, NE | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Powered by BLOX Content Management System from TownNews.com.