



NATION NOW

Iowans vote to end city in desperate bid to save community

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Published 6:34 p.m. ET Nov. 20, 2016

MOUNT UNION, Iowa — Many Americans considered the recent election to be an existential crisis, but that was certainly true for one tiny town in southeast Iowa.

This Henry County hamlet of barely more than 100 people was faced with the unenviable decision of whether to vote itself into oblivion: “Shall the discontinuance of the City of Mount Union be approved?”

Stop and think how that would feel: What if your home was at stake and you had to try to figure out which option — neither one ideal because of your city’s meager finances and dim prospects for growth — would do the least harm?

Town remembers, fondly, celibate commune destroyed by sex scandal

A speck set adrift in the middle of rich farmland, Mount Union is shaped like a backwards apostrophe or comma when you stare at it on a map.

While the rest of the nation fixated on the presidential cliffhanger, Mount Union endured its own nail-biter vote that initially came in at 31-31.

“This was more important than the Trump election!” said Linda Johnson, a resident and former city clerk whose petition triggered the referendum after the City Council already had voted to fold the city.

“I felt the citizens needed a voice in the discontinuance,” she said.

The tie was the initial news brief. On election night, Henry County Auditor Shelly Barber saw what had happened in Mount Union and dove into her database. She found that one absentee ballot remained unaccounted for. As long as it met the postmark deadline, it still could break the tie.

“I was hoping so much that it came back,” Barber said.

It did, postmarked Nov. 7, the day before the election. Johnson was so eager for the result that she was waiting at the courthouse later that week when the ballot was opened.

The news of Mount Union’s demise by a whisker margin sparked another round of short articles.

My initial kooky thought was this: In a town this small, I would expect many of the residents know precisely who mailed that final ballot to forever seal the town's fate. Why not try to track down him or her?

'People need to get along'

If all goes according to plan, Mount Union next year will become the 13th city in Iowa to evaporate since 1980 and the first since Center Junction in 2015.

The town was founded in 1904. Its population briefly topped 200 in the 1920s.

The school has long since shut down, with the brick behemoth now being renovated into apartments.

The Prairie Ag Co-op grain elevator dominates the skyline.

A post office and bank downtown face each other across the street. The Union Station Café on the north edge of town lacks any sort of sign out front since a car smashed the last one a few years ago.

Diane Breon has operated her hair salon here for 30 years. She’s a former city councilwoman, and her dad once served as mayor.

“I didn’t want it to go this far,” she said of her hometown’s last gasp.

“People needed to get along,” she added, “swallow their pride.”

As you might have guessed, many tangled threads of bitter disputes both personal and financial led to this giant knot. So the vote to scrap the town is the metaphorical pair of scissors in a last-ditch effort to cut the tension.

The city’s sewer is the centerpiece of the saga.

Mount Union is one of many towns for which a state-mandated sewer upgrade is a heavy financial burden.

The city worked with Regional Utility Service Systems (RUSS), an entity created from southeast Iowa counties and funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help smaller communities bear the cost of such monumental overhauls.

The issue has played out in the last decade in city meetings, courtrooms and news stories.

Suffice it to say that various factions have come to despise each other.

Some blame either current or former city government for bad management. Some blame RUSS for installing a sewer system costlier to maintain. Some residents haven't paid their sewer bills out of protest. Faced with unpaid fees, RUSS has hiked the sewer bill until each property now pays \$150 per month.

But RUSS has prevailed in court against the city, so Mount Union and its residents now owe the utility more than \$30,000.

"By unincorporating we'll become a better community than a city," said John Marek, the current mayor. "You take away the things that people have been fighting over, which is the power of the purse."

"If we don't do it we're going to tear each other's throats."

Johnson and her brother, yet another former mayor, have sued Marek for defamation. That case is scheduled to enter court in February, one more small grenade tossed into the timeline of the city's death spiral.

Once Mount Union is absorbed into county jurisdiction, only a few streets may be plowed in winter. That worries some of the most vulnerable residents. And the streetlights will be shut off unless somebody wants to adopt one for \$15 per month.

On the other hand, property taxes may drop by nearly 10%.

Mount Union's folk were fairly unanimous in at least one thing: They were surprised at the close vote.

But nobody would divulge the identity of that final absentee voter who broke the tie. A couple people claimed they knew who it was.

A city land auction Wednesday begins the process of the city selling off its assets. The state's City Development Board could approve the discontinuance as soon as March.

Robyn Buffington said she and her fellow townsfolk were told that as long as they follow proper procedure, such a request is unlikely to be denied.

“But who knows,” she said, “with our record we could be it. We could be the first.”

And then she indulged in a small, rueful laugh.

Bleak humor might be one of the few sure remedies left to residents here in the final months of Mount Union.

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