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Bid farewell to Cherry Creek, a farming village that will exist no more

By Mark Sommer
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The intersection with a blinking traffic light at rush-hour at Main Street and Center Road. in the middle of the Village of Cherry Creek on Friday, Feb. 3, 2017. (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

By BN

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CHERRY CREEK - This small village, located in the snow belt about an hour's drive south of Buffalo on Route 83, once hummed with activity.

Shop keepers a century ago lined Main Street. The Buffalo and South Western Railroad train stopped at the depot twice a day. Visitors getting off the train stayed at the Cherry Creek House, Bronson's or The Bacon. The Langworthy mill, Stetson Cheese & Basket Factory and the Cherry Creek Canning Company shipped their goods on the railroad's freight cars.

The village's population was more than 700, and a local newspaper - the Cherry Creek News - recorded the village's news.

That agricultural community is gone.

And now the village will soon be no more, too.

Residents last week voted to dissolve the Village of Cherry Creek. The vote was overwhelming - 70 to 32.

[Photo Gallery: A look back - The Village of Cherry Creek]

Unlike Depew, whose residents soundly rejected dissolution in January, Cherry Creek became the 20th village in New York to merge with a town since 2008.

"I think it's good they dissolved it," Dale Hillebert said. "The taxes are ridiculous, and some of the work that the village does isn't satisfactory in my book."

High taxes were the main reason many villagers cited in voting for dissolution. Cherry Creek still exists as a town, and villagers now will get more services, although it remains to be seen how much of a savings they will see.

But dissolution probably was inevitable.

Like many small towns and villages on the Southern Tier and throughout rural New York State, people have left as jobs evaporated and the social fabric frayed.

Lessons for Depew from two villages that approved dissolution

That didn't make the decision any easier. The 124-year-old Village of Cherry Creek, located in the center of the town, was incorporated in 1893.

But with population down to about 440 -- it peaked at 701 in 1900, but still had nearly that many as late as 1980 -- the majority of residents felt there were too few people to spread around the tax burden for water, sewer and other services.

Still, dissolution was a contentious enough issue that several people who spoke to The News declined to say publicly how they voted, fearing it could jeopardize customers or personal relationships.

Two centuries old

Banners along a stretch of Main Street proclaim the town's 1815 origin.

That's when Joshua Bentley Jr., a surveyor for the Holland Land Company, drove a red cherry sapling into the ground to mark the township center. He named the stream Cherry Creek as well.

The first settlers were part of the westward movement in the United States after the Revolution. They came from New England and along Lake Ontario, and stopped in Cherry Creek because of the rich soil and the pine forest.

Sharon Howe, the town's historian and librarian, leafed through pictures and held up storyboards in the library to show how much activity there once was in Cherry Creek.

A streetscape showed buildings up and down Main Street. Howe estimated more than two dozen lined the street in 1930. There also were big dairy farms in the self-contained agricultural community.

“They are all Amish now, because they’re the only ones with the people power to do it,” Howe said.

In the 1970s, the Methodist church and civic clubs still played a central role in the lives of many in the village, Howe said.

“The whole community was centered here,” she said. “But when there became fewer and fewer jobs, the houses became more rundown because people didn’t have the money to repair them, and the school teachers moved elsewhere.”

Driving lengthy distances to go to work also meant less evening time for after work activities.

“It’s been a steady decline,” Howe said.

Gary Howe, Sharon’s brother, operates an auto parts and full service repair shop in the village. He said the Cherry Creek he sees now is not the Cherry Creek he grew up in.

“This is rural America. It’s all gone down,” he said.

“We have the druggies that big cities have. Nobody cares about how their property looks. Now, the prerequisite for moving into Cherry Creek is that you have to have at least five dead cars. It’s Appalachia,” he said.

The Southern Tier makes up the northernmost portion of Appalachia.

The village’s median household income between 2011 and 2015 was \$40,000, which is \$10,000 less than the town residents.

Home values were \$61,500, which is \$18,300 less than for the whole town during the same period. And 18 percent of village residents lived in poverty, compared to 10 percent for the town.

“It’s kind of a sad thing. Nobody has pride anymore, but it’s just not Cherry Creek,” Gary Howe said. “South Dayton has problems, all these little towns have problems.”

‘There isn’t enough money’

A lone blinking yellow light marks the heart of the village at the intersection of Main and Center streets. Several scattered shops and businesses, including a NOCO gas station, line the intersection.

Ed Abbey owns one of those stores, the Cherry Creek Sub Shop. Abbey doesn’t live in the village, and was ineligible to vote. But he said his customers who supported dissolution felt something needed to be done to stem the village’s high costs.

“There isn’t enough money in this village. You’re getting less and less people,” Abbey said, discussing the concerns others talked of. “Money’s running out, and taxes are going higher and higher.”

The biggest issue has been paying for a new water system and a sewer system.

“There are not enough homes on the sewer to make anything work,” he said.

Depew residents deliver resounding 'no' to dissolving village

Lisa Gross, the village’s clerk and treasurer, lamented the decision to dissolve the village. So did Bruce Fish, the mayor.

“We are very sad to see the village dissolve, but majority rules,” Fish said. “We are hoping that this is the right decision for the village, and only time will tell.”

Fisher said residents had spoken, and he now hopes the consolidation will go smoothly for everyone’s best interest.

The community suffers from financial stress and difficulty in recruiting new leaders, said Kent Gardner, the chief economist for Rochester-based CGR, a non-profit management consultant hired to study the dissolution.

There will be savings through the merger, Gardner said, but it's not clear how much there will be down the road.

Nonetheless, it makes sense for small communities like Cherry Creek to be under one board, and one public works supervisor, Gardner said.

"As the town takes over, more cost savings will happen. But the town already has taken over a lot of the heavy lifting for municipal services," Gardner said. "The village will still run the water and sewer systems. And sidewalk plowing was the only thing the village was doing in terms of public works."

What's to come

Cherry Creek is the sixth village in the Southern Tier that has voted to dissolve since 2010.

Forestville made the decision last November. Perrysburg, Randolph and East Randolph dissolved in 2011 and Limestone in 2010.

The state of New York encourages the dissolution of villages, offering a tax credit that provides \$96,000 annually, with 75 percent used for tax reduction.

There is a process for residents to reverse their decision if they encounter buyer's remorse.

The village board has six months to develop a plan and timetable. Public hearings must be held, and the village board must approve a final plan, before residents vote on the specifics. And they can vote against the consolidation from taking effect.

But that doesn't seem likely, given the 2-to-1 vote last week, not to mention most eligible voters -- 58 percent -- didn't cast a ballot.

Yet losing the Village of Cherry Creek will take some time getting used to for some.

That includes Barbara Hall. She lives in Washington, D.C., but frequently visits family members in the village. The dissolution made her sad.

“This is my oasis, and it takes away a little of the charm,” Hall said.