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## State budget cuts hit small-town Ohio

BY ALANA SEMUELS, LOS ANGELES TIMES

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Reporting from Uniopolis, Ohio —

Residents here were all for balancing Ohio's budget. They didn't expect that to mean their town would cease to exist.

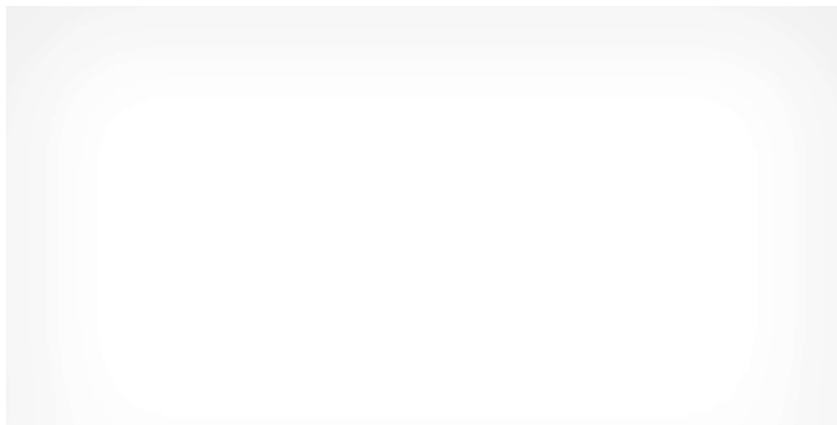
This small village of low-slung houses and squeaky swing sets in western Ohio's farm country has already laid off its part-time police officer and decided not to replace its maintenance worker, who recently retired. To save cash, Mayor William Rolston will propose Monday that the town turn off the street lights, and that Uniopolis disincorporate after more than a century in existence.

"We've decided that with the budget cuts, we just can't do it anymore," said Rolston, the mayor of 19 years, speaking from the town's one-room municipal building, its wallpaper covered with heart-shaped American flags. "About the only thing that can save it now is an act of God."

As local governments grapple with the aftermath of a brutal recession, communities across Ohio and the nation have cut back on spending. Voters elected politicians who pledged to balance budgets, but now that the effects are being felt, some are changing their minds.

They ultimately will have to answer this question: Is balancing a budget in hard times a necessity, as House Speaker John A. Boehner, whose district is just down the road, has said, or is cutting to the bone right now just too much to ask of a small town?

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Ohio has been a battleground for budget issues. In 2010, it elected a Republican governor, John Kasich, who pledged to balance the state budget without raising taxes, an approach echoed by GOP presidential candidates circling the state before Tuesday's primary. In his budget, passed last summer, he eliminated the \$8-billion deficit by slashing funding for local governments, among other things. In some towns, the new budget means a 25% reduction in state funding this year and a further 25% drop the year after.

"Think about this: In six months we eliminated an \$8-billion budget shortfall without a tax increase," Kasich said in his state of the state address this year.

The cuts were felt across the state: Auglaize County, where Uniopolis is located, lost \$5 million in the new budget, according to Innovation Ohio, a left-leaning think tank. Cuyahoga County, the home of Cleveland, lost \$230 million, and Hamilton County, where Cincinnati is located, lost \$136 million, the think tank reported.

Around the state, police departments have laid off staff — in some cases, half of the officers. Police will no longer respond in person to theft calls if there are no witnesses, said Jay McDonald, head of the Fraternal Order of Police. About 166 school districts are projected to run deficits by 2014; many are scrambling to come up with cash by selling space for cellphone towers and charging students hundreds of dollars to participate in sports or extracurricular activities. The cuts came at the same time federal stimulus funding for schools ran out, dealing a double whammy for many communities.

In the western part of the state, a Republican stronghold where forgotten barns with peeling paint sit atop flat fields, many who supported Kasich say they didn't expect the cuts would reach their small hamlets. Uniopolis voted for Kasich by a margin of more than 2 to 1.

"I did vote for Kasich. He said he was going to balance the budget and he did," said Bob Wenning, whose wife, Elaine, has sat on the Uniopolis Village Council for 19 years. "But there's a lot of towns that are hurting because of those state budget cuts."

"He could have cut less than what he did," added Elaine Wenning, standing outside the couple's small house as big rigs rumbled by on a two-lane highway.

It's not surprising that voters supported the idea of balancing the budget in concept, but don't like the reality, said Bob Ward, director of fiscal studies at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany, N.Y.

"People like the idea of cutting government, but not cutting services," he said.

Uniopolis may ask residents to pay higher taxes to keep the town afloat, but Mayor Rolston says there's little appetite for more spending in a town made up of little more than a part-time hair salon and a post office.

There's little appetite for higher taxes anywhere in Ohio, where voters in many towns have rejected requests for tax hikes. The Lakota school district near Cincinnati has asked taxpayers to put out extra money for the schools three times — and three times, voters said no. So high school athletes now pay \$550 for each sport they play, and middle school athletes pay \$350.

"We have a growing sentiment of 'live within your means,'" said Joan Powell, a member of the Lakota Board of Education. "I just hope that people will see what they've lost."

There are, of course, many who say that the budget cuts were necessary. Ohio's credit rating has been upgraded to stable since Kasich became governor.

"Some of it needed to be done," said Jim Thorpe, a retiree in Wapakoneta, a town near Uniopolis.

But it's possible that the drastic results of the cuts will motivate some voters to think twice about supporting candidates who pledge to make more trims.

"These communities have existed for generations. To try to devastate them with funding that has been taken away is un-American and un-Ohioan," said J.K. Byar, the Republican mayor of Amberley Village, a town outside Cincinnati.

In the Uniopolis post office, run by Link Noykos, a good-natured postmaster with sharp blue eyes and an easy laugh, townspeople shuffle in to buy stamps, pick up mail, and just to chat. Many blame the federal government for the budget problems, accusing it of spending money on bureaucracy and fancy dinners. Others say they want the budget balanced — as long as certain bits of spending remain.

"We need to see the cuts," said Joe Hornung, a retiree dressed in an Ohio State baseball cap and leather jacket. "I would just hate to see the police go."

Noykos has heard it all before. He recognizes that the kind of budget cuts that so many in town seem to support could lead to the disappearance of his job — and of the town's de facto social center. He doesn't flinch when Uniopolis residents launch into tirades about the size of the federal government, not recognizing they're complaining about the agency that employs their friend and confidant.

“People don’t pay attention to what’s being cut until they’re being affected,” he said. “They want to see smaller government, but they don’t want to see cuts.”

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