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The Small North Carolina Town That Wants To Dissolve Itself

February 23, 2017 · 1:28 PM ET

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The town of Centerville, N.C., sits at the intersection of two highways about 44 miles northeast of Raleigh, N.C.

Google Maps screenshot by NPR

More than 50 years after it was incorporated as a town, Centerville, N.C., is on its way to dissolving its charter, as the town is unwilling to impose a property tax and unable to offer services beyond streetlights.

Its leaders say the rural town, which comprises less than 200 acres and has fewer than 100 residents, is struggling to pay its bills and has run out of options.

Located about 44 miles northeast of Raleigh, Centerville has shrunk in recent years — to 89 people, according to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau data. First chartered in 1965, it has a volunteer fire department, but it relies on Franklin County for many other services and its finances have been stretched thin.

State Sen. Chad Barefoot recently introduced a bill to repeal the town's charter, after Centerville's leaders — including Mayor Margaret Nelms and her husband, Henry, who's also a member of the town council — decided the situation was untenable. Two community meetings backed their decision.

NPR's phone call to Nelms for comment wasn't returned; the city doesn't operate municipal offices. But she and others have spoken to local media about the looming shutdown.

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"We did it because we don't get enough funding to keep going, and people don't want a tax. There's nothing else we can do," Nelms said in an interview with the Raleigh News & Observer. "There's nothing left to do except this. I'm very sad."

Nelms told local TV station WRAL that only 12 votes were cast in the last election — and that she and the council members accounted for four of them.

Centerville is the kind of place a driver might need only a tap of the brake to acknowledge — for a brief stretch of North Carolina Highway 561, the speed limit drops to 45 mph, as motorists pass through the crossroads that define the town. Along the way, farmland gives way to grassy yards and a Baptist church.

The town's crossroads includes Arnold's Convenient Mart, where owner Clay Arnold told WRAL that he'll miss the town's streetlights if they don't survive the shutdown.

"The streetlights are nice," Arnold told the station. "If it's not incorporated, I understand they'd do away with them."

For now, the fate of the streetlights is unclear; Nelms and other residents have said the town's life won't change after its charter is dissolved.

There was never anything large about Centerville: the legislation that approved the town's charter established its borders just 450 feet on either side of the two highways that make up its crossroads, creating a jagged outline on the map.

It turns out that it will take just three sentences to delete a town from state records.

Sen. Barefoot's legislation repeals Chapter 695 of the Session Laws of 1965 — which established the charter — and gives Nelms and other officials 30 days to liquidate the town's accounts. Any leftover money will go to the Centerville Fire Department.

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