

## Tiny Iowa town prepares to disband after 105 years

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A pickup truck enters the city limits of Mount Sterling, Iowa, Friday, April 6, 2012. The small southeast Iowa town with a population of about 40 plan disband next week because no resident wants to serve as mayor or on the City Council. It will be the end of a city incorporated 105 years ago and w first Iowa city to discontinue operation since 2005. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) - In Mount Sterling's last city election, nobody ran for mayor or the City Council.

In fact, none of the city's 44 residents even voted.

With civic engagement all but nonexistent, the southern Iowa community's last four elected officials plan to meet Wednesday to vote to dissolve the municipal government and to call it quits after 105 years as a city.

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"The older people like me in our 60s and 70s feel sad about it," said Judy Ash, 67, who has served on the council for 23 years. "The younger ones are saying, why do you care?"

It would be only the ninth Iowa municipality in the last 30 years to disband - the last being Littleport, population 26, in 2005.

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There never has been much to Mount Sterling, which has a \$5,000 annual budget, no city workers and is only eight square blocks of mostly unpaved roads. It once had two grocery stores, gasoline stations, a restaurant and a pickle factory, but today only has a bar and grill, a one-man auto repair shop, and a six-room hunting lodge.

The community was settled in the 1830s and became incorporated in 1907, but it peaked early, reaching a population of 232 in the 1910 census and shrinking ever since. Today, most people commute to larger cities, and that might be a key reason for Mount Sterling's demise.

"There are a few older people and some of them have served the community in the past. They feel like they've done their time and don't want to do it anymore," Mayor Tom Allen said. "The younger people with families are busy. Most work out of town."

That includes Allen, 44, who works in sales at an aluminum castings company in Fairfield, about 35 miles north.

He was elected mayor with five votes in November 2009 out of a total of eight votes cast. He volunteered to run after a woman who had planned to run accepted a job working a shift that wouldn't allow her to attend meetings, prompting her to drop out just before Election Day.

Since no one ran in the last election, Allen and the council agreed to stay on for the town's final days.

Once the council votes to dissolve, residents will have 30 days to circulate a petition seeking a citywide vote. If no one does, the city will file its resolution to discontinue with the state's City Development Board. Mount Sterling then will become an unincorporated area of Van Buren County.

The few thousand dollars remaining in the city coffers will be managed by the state board to pay bills that arise for the next six months. After that, any remaining money will go to the county, which will handle road maintenance and law enforcement.

Looking back on their town's history, people say the biggest event was in 2003, when then-Mayor Jo Hamlett suggested at a city budget meeting that they could raise plenty of money by adopting a local ordinance to fine people for lying. Although he was joking, Hamlett put the idea in a monthly column he wrote for an area newspaper, and from there it was picked up by other news outlets and soon became an international story.

A reporter from the Los Angeles Times visited Mount Sterling, and a story also ran in The New York Times. NBC news called to talk to the mayor as did reporters from as far away as Australia.

Hamlett died a few years ago.

Ash said Wednesday's vote will be a sad event, but she and a few others have done all they can.

"We've fought awful hard to keep this town going," she said. "There are just not enough of us in town here anymore."



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