

## NEWS

## Hit by floods and budget cuts



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**NEVILLE** — Dennis Cooper spread the history book across the hood of his pickup and stubbed his finger at a photo. It's a picture of a stately house on a corner lot. In the front, a porch.

"See that porch right there? A lot of tales were told on that porch," said Cooper, who was born a few blocks away in the tiny Clermont County riverfront village of Neville.

He looked up, across the street, toward a once thriving intersection in the village and points out the corner house's location. This spot connects the highway that runs through the Neville and a street that once dropped to a bustling public landing on the Ohio River. Now, the spot is an empty lot covered in grass, one of many that litter the tiny village like blank tombstones.

In less than a month, Neville itself could be dead.

The village is strapped for cash. Its 100 residents face a once-rare but increasingly common dilemma in Ohio: Should the 208-year-old village try to survive on an overstretched budget? Or should it vote itself out of existence, casting its financial responsibilities upon the surrounding township?

It's not just a Neville problem. Next month, two other villages will vote on whether to dissolve. Eight Ohio villages have voted to disband since 2005 — half in just the last three years, according to an analysis of election results by The Enquirer.

Neville might not have much of a choice. The 1997 flood drove out more than half its population. The federal government bought up about 40 percent of the flood-stricken village as a safety measure, leaving it to village leaders to keep up the empty lots. And then the hammer: funding cuts championed by Gov. John Kasich and fellow Republican leaders.

The cuts to the Local Government Fund helped balance the state's budget but hamstrung Neville's finances. Cecil Collins Jr., Neville's mayor, said the state auditor's office gave Neville a choice: Vote to dissolve, or eventually face a court-ordered dissolution.

"We'll be lucky if we make it the rest of this year if the vote doesn't go through," Collins said.

Neville's dissolution would be a quiet end to a place that predates the founding of the state of Ohio. The village has survived competition from other river towns, the end of the steamboat era and a string of devastating floods.

The '97 flood drained Neville, but red ink drowned it. On March 15, the village faces its latest and perhaps final indignity: Death by ballot box.

### 'It really hurt us'

In Neville, floods come through the back door. The surging waters of the Ohio break over into the "mill ditch" behind the village, flooding the low-lying area between the cluster of homes and nearby hills before swamping Neville. Floods are part of life in river towns, with last-century deluges remembered as historical markers with outsized effect: the '37 flood, the '64 flood, the '97 flood.

"With each flood, a little piece of Neville disappeared down the Ohio River," said Cooper, now a trustee of Washington Township, which surrounds Neville and will bear its costs if its dissolves.

Each flood took its toll, but the 1997 deluge exacted a brutal price. Two-hundred fifty people called Neville home in the years before the flood. A few years after, only 100 remained. The village celebrated its bicentennial in 2008 with the slogan "Neville: 200 years and still afloat." But the damage was done.

"When all those folks moved out, it really hurt us," Collins said.

The hardy few who chose to stay in Neville either left their homes as they were, or built them up on foundations above flood level to qualify for flood insurance.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency bought up lots in the village on the condition nothing be built on them again. The agency demolished the flood-damaged buildings on the lots and left them covered in grass, with uneven patches marking filled-in septic systems and basements that sunk over time.

The lots are a money pit for Neville. There is little the village can do with them, but they require mowing to prevent harm by another force of nature.

“Face it, you can’t let them grow up,” Collins said. “If somebody driving by along the road throws a cigarette out, you have a fire.”

### **'We're just getting by'**

Neville wasn’t always this vulnerable. It’s an old village, founded in 1808 by Gen. Presley Neville, a Revolutionary War veteran.

Generations of Badgleys, Donovans and Blackburns and other families have lived at this spot by the Ohio. Their names are carved on headstones and engraved into the small war memorial on the town square. The old Blackburn store is now the post office. A few years ago, Janet Blackburn retired after 40 years as postmaster. Ann Badgley serves as the village's fiscal officer.

At one point, in 1880, 445 people called Neville home. A county history from that year describes the village as a bustling commercial spot. Cooper and Collins described bountiful harvests in their lifetimes from soil enriched by the river, baseball and football games and a steady hustle and bustle.

Now, Neville is no longer home to any businesses. Village leaders have the authority to introduce a vote to raise taxes, but that won’t happen in Neville, where the median income is about \$31,000.

“We could try to pass levies for tax increases, but how would that work?” said Collins. “People aren’t well-to-do out here. We’re just getting by.”

Neville depends on a regular disbursement from the state, which collects taxes and doles them out to local governments from the state's Local Government Fund through a revenue sharing model. Many local governments – villages, townships, counties and cities – depended on the money, as well as estate tax revenue, to help cover their expenses. Some governments, such as Neville, entirely rely on money from the fund.

But the Local Government Fund proved a rich target for Kasich and Republican legislators searching for answers in recent years to the state’s budget woes. They also saw the cuts as a way to force local government to streamline and save money by merging where possible. Others, specifically many in local governments, have another view.

“They balanced their budget on the backs of local government,” said Cooper, who said he's backing Donald Trump over Kasich as the Republican nominee for president.

It's hard to say how much the budget cuts played a part in driving Ohio villages to their last day, but the votes are happening more often. In March, two villages join Neville on the block: Somerville in Butler County and Smithfield in Jefferson County. Eight Ohio villages disbanded in the last decade, according to an Enquirer review of election results. All but two did so since 2011, and half did so in the last three years. Most villages facing quiet deaths don't get much media coverage, but reports provide occasional details: a lack of elected officials, messy bookkeeping and, yes, budget issues.

In Neville’s case, the Local Government Fund money was the only revenue source for the village's break-even \$15,000 operating budget. The cuts chopped the village's share down by several thousand dollars at first, then further. Last year Neville made do with just \$9,000.

Cooper ticked off local damage caused by state cuts: \$6,000 from Neville, \$5,000 from Chilo, \$10,000 from Felicity, \$30,000 from Washington Township.

“They say they’ve got this surplus. Start giving some of it back to us,” Cooper said, referring to the state’s renewed financial condition. “That would be the answer. It would help every village and every governmental entity in the state of Ohio. But they haven’t done that.”

If the village votes to dissolve, its burdens will fall to the township. Collins said there are no easy answers. State law doesn't specify how a village's responsibilities should be handled. Neville will be an additional burden.

The 100 residents of Neville may stay after they vote to disband. But the village will be left even more hollow. No longer will those responsible for the village live next door. There will be fewer reasons for neighbors to see each other, fewer stories told on porches as the world goes by.

### **Village, RIP**

#### Villages that have dissolved, 2005-2015

Lawrenceville, Clark Co., 2005  
Alvordton, Williams Co., 2007  
St. Martin, Brown Co., 2011  
Fort Shawnee, Allen Co., 2012  
Uniopolis, Auglaize Co., 2013  
Orient, Pickaway Co., 2013  
Cherry Fork, Adams Co., 2014  
Salesville, Guernsey Co., 2015

#### Villages voting on dissolution March 15

Neville, Clermont Co.  
Somerville, Butler Co.  
Smithfield, Jefferson Co.

*Source: Election results, Ohio Secretary of State*