



## TOWN FROM DISSOLVING

**John Hanna**

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The central Kansas town of Frederick has dwindled over the decades to just 10 people, and its only real expense is a \$55-a-month electric bill for a half-dozen or so street lights that illuminate the unpaved streets.

Some residents want to dissolve their city, but that hasn't been easy.

For a community with nine registered voters, the tally at the ballot box last month was 13-7 in favor of keeping Frederick a third-class city. The three workers at the polling place 5 miles to the west handed out the wrong ballots to some voters living outside the city. Local and state officials, at a loss for what to do, are letting the results stand.

Either way, it's unclear whether anything will change for Frederick's residents. Just off a state highway about 75 miles northwest of Wichita, this city-in-name-only has no approved budget and didn't elect anyone to any office in its last municipal election in 2015.

Melode Huggans, the town's 63-year-old clerk, has lived in Frederick for 20 years because she enjoys "the country life." She's ambivalent about the election results.

"We're just a quiet town where nobody bothers anybody," said Huggans, who sends in the town's check each month for the electric bill. "Not much goes on here."

Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, the state's top elections official, has championed tough state voter identification laws and argued election fraud is a serious concern; he's a potential U.S. homeland security secretary nominee for President-elect Donald Trump. But no one has alleged fraud in the Frederick vote, and Kobach's office doesn't believe it has authority to intervene in a purely local question.

Frederick was incorporated in Rice County in 1909, and its population peaked at about 150 in the following year's federal census. A description published a few years later called it "a shipping and trading point for a wealthy agricultural district" with good schools and "a number of churches."

But the population dropped sharply in the 1930s and kept dwindling.

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wells, have septic tanks and heat their homes with propane.

An 1872 state law sets high hurdles for dissolving a town. Absent a specific act of the Legislature, a majority of a city's voters must petition its officials to put the issue on the ballot. Two-thirds of those voting must cast their ballots "against a city."

It's not impossible, though: Residents of Mildred in eastern Kansas' Allen County dissolved their town last month. The vote: 3-1.

The Hutchinson News first reported on the problems with Frederick's vote. Rice County Clerk Alicia Showalter said voters outside Frederick who mistakenly received ballots including the city's question didn't alert poll workers.

The three-member Rice County Commission knew too many ballots had been cast. But Chairman Bill Oswalt said it couldn't determine which ones came from inside the town and didn't want to invalidate votes in unaffected contests.

And because it was a local question, the results became final when the county commissioners certified them, said Bryan Caskey, elections director for the secretary of state's office.

County officials are considering whether Frederick is allowed to have a special election or must wait until regularly scheduled municipal elections in November 2017.

"They've been muddling along for years," Rice County Counselor Scott Bush said. "I guess it probably wouldn't hurt for them to muddle along a little longer."