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POLITICS

# Some rural communities in Illinois are pushing back against the narrative that they're dying

By Hank Sanders  
Chicago Tribune • May 30, 2023 at 5:00 am



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A person walks out of the Cullom Community Market in Cullom, Illinois on May 9, 2023. The market is co-owned by town residents and allows them to get groceries without having to travel far. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)

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CULLOM, Illinois — Hack Street isn't exactly Michigan Avenue.

The main thoroughfare of downstate Cullom — a town of around 600 about halfway between Bourbonnais and Bloomington — showcases cement geese hand-molded by the mayor and a market often staffed by one clerk.



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But don't confuse a quiet town with a dead one. Cullom's business center is crowded, its high school enrollment is stable, and most homes here are occupied, so trying to buy one can be difficult.

Rural towns like Cullom stand in contrast to some larger downstate communities that have struggled amid population loss and a changing national landscape over the past half-century as companies that once employed hundreds have left and stores on rural Main Streets have closed.

These smaller towns also are being used as examples by advocates for rural development who are trying to change the narrative about how small towns — and rural America as a whole — are perceived.

The University of Illinois Extension earlier this year held a [series of webinars](#) to arm leaders of rural communities with positive data, such as fully occupied homes and anchored schools, while suggesting language those leaders should use to recruit people to move to rural towns, which are often coping with negative stereotypes.



How successful they'll be remains to be seen, but many of those same advocates say small towns for decades have been written off for dead when really they are just in the midst of change.



A person walks a dog down Hack Street, the main thoroughfare of downstate Cullom, on May 9, 2023. Towns like Cullom are being used as examples by advocates for rural development. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)

“They haven’t died — they’ve evolved,” said Ben Winchester, who teaches community economics at the University of Minnesota and was a main speaker for the Illinois Extension webinars.

“We’ve had a lot of transitions, and our Main Streets ... look different,” Winchester said. “And just because they look different doesn’t mean they’re dead, necessarily.”

Indeed, residents and leaders in Cullom and Wenona, a town of 1,000 an hour’s drive away and about 25 miles south of the LaSalle-Peru area, say their towns are very much in demand. Cullom Mayor Barbara Hahn said that people — mostly from larger cities around the state — call her “all the time” to see if there are any



houses for sale and she mostly has to tell them that the housing stock is at capacity.

“I think it’s where they want to raise their families,” Hahn said of the callers.

“Right now, I believe we have one house for sale. ... A house goes for sale and generally it’s not on the market long.”



A cement goose hand-molded by the mayor sits on the edge of Hack Street on May 9, 2023, in Cullom, Illinois. Hack Street provides Cullom residents with everything they need, including a market, library, health center, bank and even a bar. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)





Karen Moritz, who has lived in Cullom for 29 years and in rural Illinois her whole life, mows her lawn on May 9, 2023. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)

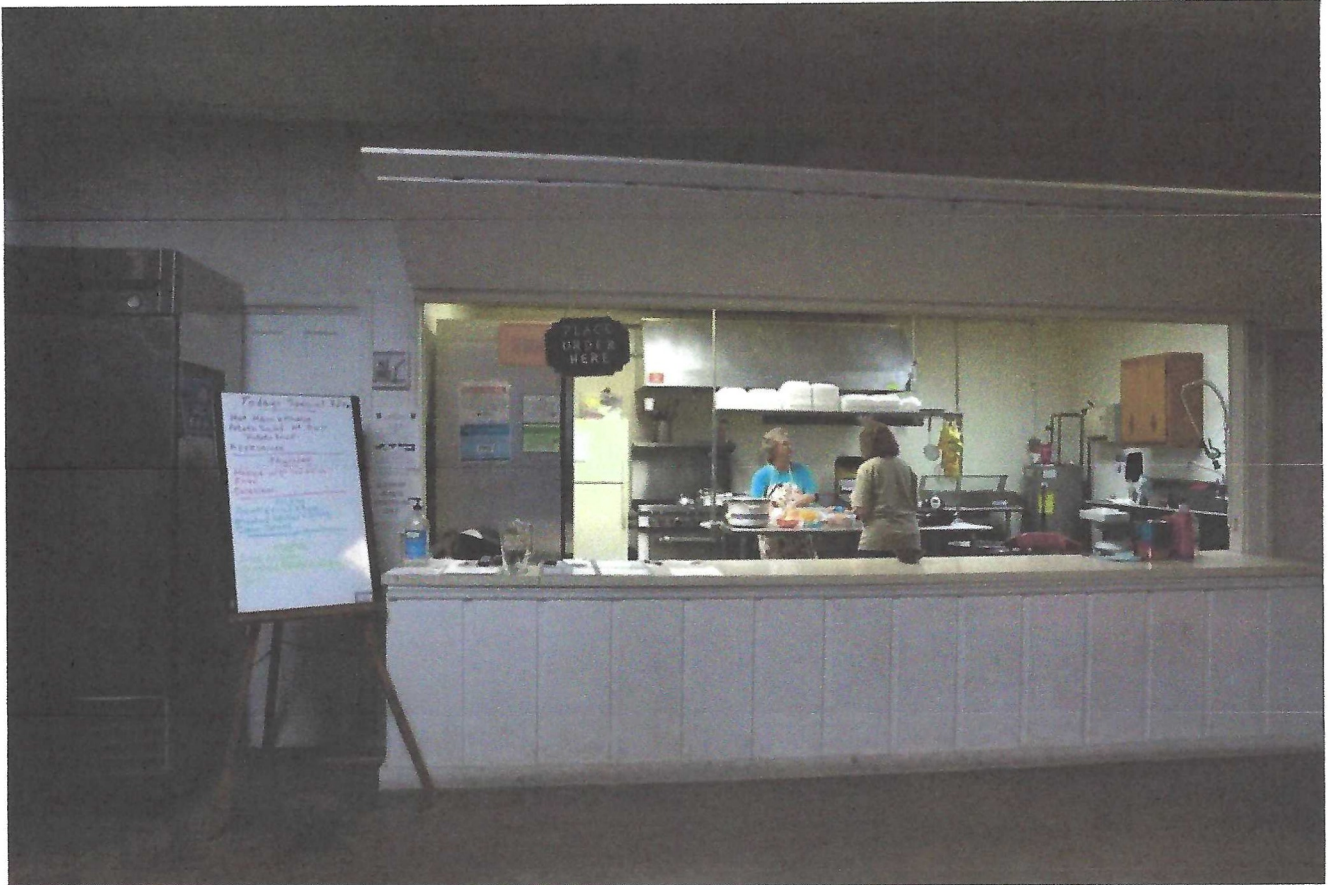
At the American Legion Mess Hall in Cullom, the town's main lunch spot was quiet on grilled cheese day except for the John Wayne Western playing on the television in the corner. When Hahn walked in, the energy picked up. She greeted everyone by name and reminded them cocktail hour was just around the corner.

"I grew up in a small community," Vicki Allen said while waiting in line for the Legion's popular tomato soup. She grew up 10 miles away and raised her kids and grandkids in the area. "I just love the rural area and I just want my kids to have that same opportunity that I had."

Later, Megan Beckett, who recently moved to Cullom with her family of five from the Chicago suburb of Oswego, said she appreciates rural life.

"I like the small-town feel of everybody knows everybody," said Beckett. "They are a lot more friendly down (here). You don't have to worry about your kids playing in the neighborhood."





The American Legion Mess Hall in Cullom, pictured on Feb. 15, 2022, is the main lunch spot in town. "I just love the rural area and I just want my kids to have that same opportunity that I had," says Vicki Allen, while waiting in line for the Legion's popular tomato soup. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)





With a John Wayne Western playing on the television in the corner, people eat lunch at the American Legion Mess Hall in Cullom on Feb. 15, 2022. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)

One of the most interesting reasons why so many homes are occupied in small towns is because older people are living in them longer than they used to.

According to a health and retirement paper published by [Freddie Mac](#), past generations' older residents moved out of their homes 5% to 15% more frequently than today's seniors.

Government programs that help seniors stay in their homes longer make aging in place easier, along with the increasing popularity of telehealth and other technological improvements, according to the study.

But seniors hanging onto their homes at a higher rate has led to a "lack of houses for sale" creating an "important barrier to young adults buying their first homes," the Freddie Mac paper notes.

The issue is particularly acute in smaller towns.

"Unfortunately, the supply is not meeting the demand," said Brad Cole, the executive director of Illinois Municipal League. "An older aging housing stock is what small communities have."

Despite some of the positive trends, Wenona has struggled to attract businesses and keep the younger generation from moving out of town, according to the town's recent mayor, Inga Neste.

"It's not too many new things going on," she said. "Our town (is) suffering, probably like all little towns. It's kind of sad."





Store manager Lori Flessner, left, talks to school board member Kris Haag, center, and Mayor Barbara Hahn, right, during a stop at the the Cullom General Store on Feb. 15, 2022. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)

A vast majority of rural counties and towns have lost population over the past decade. In a state with 102 counties, only 15 grew in the decade between 2010 and 2020, including Cook County and its five bordering counties, according to census data. These six counties also make up about two-thirds of the state's population.

[The Governor's Rural Affairs Council 2022 Report](#) attributes the decrease in rural populations to the reduced demand for farmers due to the mechanization of labor, decreasing birthrates in rural areas, out-migration caused by lack of job opportunities and the decreasing number of immigrants coming to the Midwest. Rural residents also are ranked below urbanites in basic criteria such as earned wages, workforce growth, internet access and college completion, according to the report.

But Neste said that the lack of population increase is not because rural life is undesirable.



“We have no homes for sale. That’s good, that’s probably the silver lining,” Neste said. “It goes off the market very fast.”

The circumstances lead to one inescapable, albeit morbid, conclusion, experts say. Prospective rural dwellers are left waiting for seniors occupying single-family homes to die.

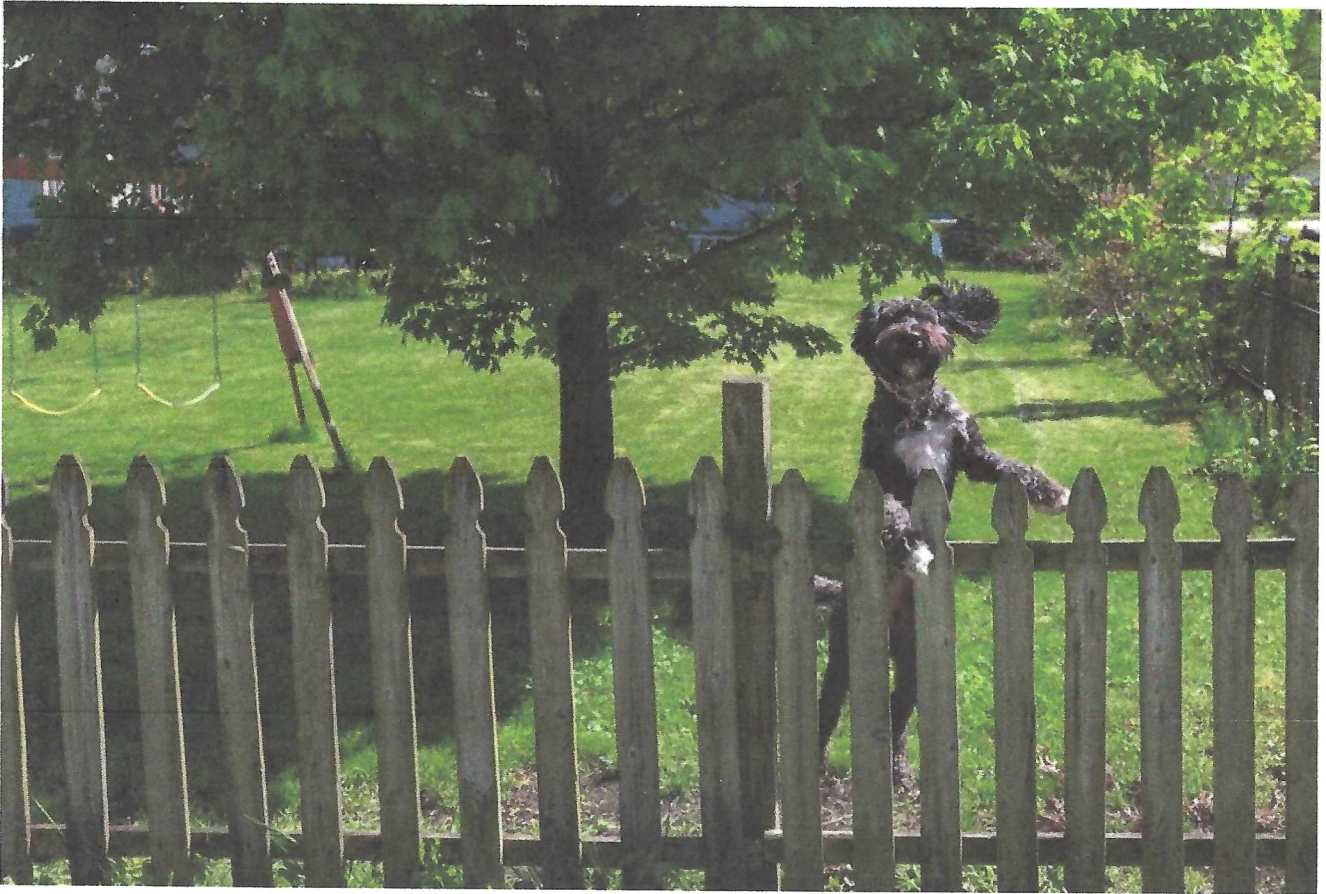
“Seventy-five percent of our rural homes are going to turn over in the next 20 to 25 years,” the University of Minnesota’s Winchester said.

In statistics provided to the Tribune, Winchester cited the census data of the percentage of homes owned by aging populations. “This is unprecedented,” he said. “Never before have we turned over this much housing.”



A quiet neighborhood with lots of trees and greenery in Cullom, Illinois, on May 9, 2023. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)





An excited dog runs around a backyard in Cullom on May 9, 2023. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)

While small towns are dealing with a housing crunch, those same towns aren't seeing much growth when it comes to building new homes.

One exception has been Dieterich — a town of 900 about 10 miles southeast of Effingham — but only because it took big risks.

Leaders years ago leaned on its residential tax increment financing tool and engaged the local community to help spur residential growth that they think might be a blueprint for other rural towns.

“It's a really fascinating case study,” said Jerry Foster, who is the former director of business development and is currently in the role of “small town champion” at the locally owned Resource Bank, which focuses on investing in small towns.

While Resource is not the local bank for Dieterich, Foster has studied the economic well-being of small towns in Illinois and said he is in awe of the progress Dieterich has made.



“They were successful in bringing in enough houses to revitalize their school district,” Foster said. “Now, Dieterich since 2000 has just about doubled in size. And their median income has come up.”

In the late 1990s, Dieterich’s population was stagnant and officials were considering closing the town’s school and incorporating it into a new district, according to Foster.

So the community leadership created a residential tax increment financing district, a development tool long used in Chicago that Dieterich employed to decrease financial barriers for developers to build. The TIF allows Dieterich to assume a significant risk by taking a roughly \$30,000 loss on each of the 130 new housing lots it has created.

But Village Clerk Brittny Gipson says it is this risk that has incentivized developers to build, and that only six of those 130 lots now remain on the market.



New home construction is in progress at the corner of Liberty Drive and Memorial Lane in Dieterich, Illinois, on May 11, 2023. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)



“The changes have been phenomenal,” Gipson said, while reflecting on how far her town has come since she moved here from Oswego in 2009. “To see our community grow and the new residents, the people who truly love living here, it’s really satisfying.”

Foster said that while not all towns experience the level of success Dieterich has seen, Resource Bank’s bet on rural is paying off.

“Our assets have grown dramatically in the last five to seven years,” he said. “And I wouldn’t just say small businesses, I’d say small to midsize.”

Dieterich’s second secret to success came when local leaders established the Dieterich Community Development Corp. — a 501(c)3 that helps the town establish fundraising efforts for local projects.

“Dieterich has a great model for growing residential housing,” Foster said. “If we can get traction with the planning in some of these communities we absolutely want to look at housing.”

Community members such as Ben Marks, who moved to Dieterich from Orland Park to start a family with his wife, said Dieterich offered a balance of small-town perks while also meeting the needs of the residents.

“I love what Dieterich has done in the last few years,” he said. “I just feel like it’s a really clean town, safe community. ... I feel like the people are very welcoming and feel like I can make a difference and be a part of a smaller community.”



Ben and Megan Marks play with their daughter Olivia in a park near a subdivision in Dieterich, Illinois, on May 11, 2023. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)

Small towns still have their struggles. Inflation and environmental regulations increase the rural cost of living as longer commutes mean higher energy costs both on commutes to work and commutes of goods into local stores and businesses.

Urbanization causes small towns to continually be left off grocery store routes, resulting in stores like Cullom Community Market going years without a visit from its soda distributor. The poverty rate is **also higher in rural counties** than in metro counties, the GRAC report says.

But the demand for housing and Dieterich's blueprint to meet that demand give hope for people like Hahn and her neighbors in Cullom's American Legion Mess Hall.

"I'm optimistic," Hahn said. "The economic future for the whole state is not good, but I think the small towns are better positioned than the big cities. I think



Cullom's going to be here for quite a while.”

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