FARNAM—To parts of rural Nebraska there's a foul word that begins with a "c." Consolidation.

Since peaking near the turn of the century, the number of school districts in Nebraska has decreased drastically. In some cases fights have broken out in inter-municipal disputes that harken back to the Hatfields and McCoys.

But sometimes economic reality forces former rivals to work together.

The 1996 Eustis-Farnam school consolidation went relatively smoothly because of the economic issues present at the time. Property taxes were at a high, Eustis needed more funds and Farnam needed more students. Farnam's high school enrollment was less than 25 in 1996 and Eustis' wasn't much better.

"A lot of people were real upset," said Kenneth Bellamy, a two-term member of the Eustis-Farnam school board who is finishing up his seventh year. "After a few years of everybody growling back and forth, well it's settled down. Now it's in excellent shape."

The school boards of Eustis and Farnam opted to hold an election to dissolve both districts and create a new one. In both communities, 60 percent of voters said yes.

But voters in Farnam didn't get exactly what they voted for.

One by one, promises made to Farnam were broken.

In 1997, elementary schools were in both locations and the joint middle school was in Farnam. A few years later, the elementary school closed in Farnam, and the middle school was closed thereafter. Judy Brockmeier, a Eustis resident whose children where in school during consolidation, said the repetitive 10-minute drives between the towns angered some people in Eustis.

“When we started out the first couple of years it took a while to shake (the details) out,” Brockmeier said. She said even though promises were made and broken, she said she didn’t feel the board was being dishonest. The board members were just responding to reality.

At one point, Dawson Pubic Power refused to turn on the football lights in Farnam because they were too old and dangerous.

The towns received state incentive money to consolidate, but it ran out in three years. Seven teachers had to be let go.

Now, Farnam’s old buildings sit in the corner of the town largely unused.

“It’s hard to argue the results of an election,” said Tom Vickers, a former state senator who lobbied for several education groups at the time.

Vickers actively promoted the consolidation between the two communities, but he said most of his opponents came from older residents who “remembered 30 years ago back when they lost a football game.” By the time push came to shove, pure economics pushed all school activities to Eustis.

The Farnam superintendent, Joyce Huffman, said she saw consolidation as an opportunity to improve her district. In the years prior, Eustis and Farnam were competing as one team in a variety of sports, and joint school board meetings were also held.

Just a short drive to the east, the Eustis-Farnam school is going strong. Steve Sampy, the Eustis-Farnam superintendent, said the school isn't short-staffed or short of resources. Of the 195 students currently enrolled, fewer than 40 commute from Farnam and 20 come from Cozad, which is just north of Eustis on Interstate 80.

Post-consolidation, the newly created Frontier County school district was able to provide more for students. The larger tax base allowed for increased funding for activities and academics and middle school students got their own faculty. More classes were added to the high school, students could take chemistry, physics, journalism and added foreign language classes.

"It's been a good situation for the education of the kids, and that's the important thing," said Dan Widick a retired Eustis-Farnam science teacher who taught for 40 years.

Before consolidation, Widick could only offer advanced science classes every other year. Afterward, he taught physics and chemistry at the same time. Widick said most of the teachers stayed out of the politics of the time, but most supported it.

With 17 years to allow wounds to heal, many of the 171 people who live in Farnam are no longer angry with the situation. Farnam's situation is emblematic of the shifts in Nebraska's economy. It is no longer sustainable to have thousands of schools across the state, and even without a school, a community can still survive.

"It's something that can be worked out if there are people willing to accept that's what it has to be," said Doris Bellamy, a Farnam resident.

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