

## Centerville Is Not Dying.

### **Part 1 of a 3 part look at the future of Centerville**

*By Jared Hybertson, Centerville Economic Development Coordinator*

Right before Christmas break this past school semester I was having a conversation with one of our fine teachers at Centerville Public School and he mentioned to me that he had overheard a conversation two middle school students were having about the school and community. “Centerville is dying, you know that right?” the one student said. “Yeah, pretty soon there won’t be enough kids for us to even have a school”, the other one replied. Of course this was a tough conversation for the teacher to stomach and so he jumped in and did his best to explain to the students that their comments were simply not true. The teacher’s attempt to correct the two student’s way of thinking on this matter may have come too late unfortunately. As we know, once a child hears something from an older kid, or a parent, or even an adult they look up to, they often take it and run with it and that’s when an idea like Centerville is dying starts to spread.

With comments floating around like, “this town just isn’t what it used to be”, or “things look dead around here”, it’s no wonder our kids pick up on these things and repeat them at school. It’s often easy to get caught up in what’s happening in the short term and overreact to it. I get it. There is no doubt we need to look to do whatever we can to address the issues we have in front of us. In some cases the naysayers are right when they say Centerville isn’t what it used to be. In reality, it more than likely never will be exactly what it once was in its heyday, with specialty stores and booming downtown. Centerville’s proximity to larger communities like Sioux Falls, Vermillion, and Yankton is appealing, but in many cases it has also contributed to the decline we have seen in our downtown. As a society we are more mobile than ever before. It’s nothing anymore, to run and grab something 30 to 40 minutes away that you need or want and not think twice about it. And what do we do while we are in those larger towns? We make a couple more stops, we get our car washed, maybe we go eat somewhere. We think nothing of it and are all guilty of it at some point. We are all aware of “The Wal-Mart Effect” and the impact those big box stores can have on the economy of a small town. But we rarely think about the impact those sales tax dollars leaving town has on our community. Unless we actually make a conscious effort to shop locally and tell ourselves, “I am going to make it a point get 20% more of my goods and services here locally”, we will never do it.

Centerville’s situation is not one that is uncommon to other rural communities across the state. Many have already been faced with declining downtowns and tough decisions on sports coops for their schools. Centerville has held on longer than most. We are only just now wrestling with these challenges. But underneath all these challenges we face, there is still a wonderful, appealing community with a lot to offer and a lot of heart; a great small town where people want to live and raise a family. In fact, Centerville’s school numbers across the board Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade this year might surprise you. Certainly the upcoming class sizes in the lower grades show a promising future for the Centerville School district. Despite some early uneasiness, and losing some students to open enrollment, Centerville has actually seen an overall increase in their numbers K-12 this year. Maybe even more telling is the fact that our population has been holding fairly steady compared to some of the other communities in our

county as well. These promising numbers paint a different picture than what the perception might currently be. But I will dive deeper into these statistics that actually support Centerville as growing community, rather than a dying one, a little later.

For now I want to address the uphill battle we have in front of ourselves as a community. It's no secret we are facing some challenges and going through some trying times right now. This is a crucial moment in the history of Centerville, unlike anything the community has really had to face before. It's time we take a good look in the mirror, face some facts, and figure out what we are going to do to overcome these challenges. There are some things we can't ignore if we want to turn the corner and get things heading back in the right direction. Yes, our current high school numbers are lower than we would like to see. And yes the varsity sports programs are down or suffering because of it. How as a community are we going to show our loyalty and continue to support to these kids as they continue to build towards the future? And yes, there are businesses for sale in our downtown and vacant buildings that continue to sit empty. Let's come together on these challenges and find some solutions. Let's have some community conversations and brainstorm on ways to address these issues and concerns for our downtown.

As citizens of a small town, with an already delicate economic ecosystem, we all need to remember that the negative comments or conversations we may be having about our town or our school can be detrimental, and tend to get overheard by our children. Impressionable youth will only feed of this and emulate our negative dialogue. This pattern only reinforces the negativity and feeds into a pessimistic culture within the community. It's kind of like the famous movie quote from Julie Robert's character Vivian, in the movie *Pretty Woman*, "People put you down enough, you start to believe it." As a community we are what we believe we are. Let me say that again, we are what we believe we are. If we already believe we are a dying community with a failing school, than we are already too late. But if we as a community continue to believe in our small town, and know that what we are going through is just a hurdle that we will eventually overcome, then we will survive and become a stronger community for it.

These are the challenges we face. To equate these challenges to "Centerville is dying" is such an unfortunate thing to hear. From a middle school student, a parent, or anyone else with ties to this community, it is unfortunate. As a town we need to come together, find solutions, educate people, get involved, and help change this mentality of hopelessness and despair. Centerville is NOT dying. Centerville may be changing, or rebuilding, or evolving, but it is certainly NOT dying.