

## Centerville Is Not Dying.

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

*By Jared Hybertson, Centerville Economic Development Coordinator*

Perception isn't reality, but sometimes it's the only thing that matters for a small town. How a town is viewed by not only its residents, but by outsiders and potential residents can truly make or break your community. A community that is perceived to be clean, and friendly, and busy, and growing, is a place that people are attracted to. But a community that is considered to be the opposite of that, well that is tough to overcome. The perception people have of a community can affect everything from where people decide to shop or visit, to where they ultimately decide to live or not live.

As I discussed in last week's article there is no doubt Centerville currently faces some challenges. Lower numbers in our high school, businesses for sale, empty buildings in our downtown, and an aging housing stock, to name a few. From an outside perspective, there may be somewhat of a perception that we are a community on a downhill slide. But in reality, despite all these challenges, Centerville continues to attract young families to our community that want to live here. Young families who want to raise their children here and give them a good education, along with all the opportunities and experiences that come with living in a small town.

In the first article, part 1 of this 3 part look at the future of Centerville, I shared with you a discussion I had with a teacher who had overheard some discouraging comments from a couple of his students revolving around what lies ahead for the school. In the article I stressed how important it is for us as a community to keep a positive outlook and stand united to overcome the challenges we currently face in our town. This time around I will actually go through some statistics that suggest despite some of the current struggles, Centerville is actually maintaining and ready to turn a corner and see growth. The future looks bright for the Centerville School district and the community as a whole. I can get on my soapbox and tell you that we are going to be fine and everything looks great, but instead let's look a little more closely at the numbers.

### **A Population Comparison**

According to the data, Centerville remains one of the more popular communities in Turner County to live. Yes, it's no secret that like so many other small communities in Turner County, Centerville's population has decreased some over the years, but since 1960 we have only seen a 2.14% decrease in our population, going from 887 people in 1960 to an estimated 868 in 2015. Yes that is a decrease, but it's a small decrease relatively speaking compared to what some other surrounding rural communities have lost. The numbers show that Centerville is actually maintaining its population, and quite honestly for a small town in rural South Dakota these days, surviving and maintaining in population is actually a big success.

So let's compare Centerville to the other communities in Turner County and also Turner County as a whole. Here is the estimated population breakdown by town:

Town	Population Gain/Loss Since 1960	Population Gain/Loss Since 2000	Estimated Population as of 2015
Centerville	-2.14%	-4.7%	868
Chancellor	+17.27%	-21.80%	258
Dolton	-49.29%	12.5%	36
Hurley	-11.11%	-6.20%	400
Irene	-10.62%	-4.7%	420
Marion	-9.12%	-14.30%	767
Monroe	-0.64%	-4.9%	155
Parker	-1.19%	-3.7%	993
Viborg	+9.01%	-8.6%	762

*Statistics taken and evaluated from Wikipedia.org*

So what do these statistics tell us? The main thing it tells us is that Turner County as a whole has seen a significant decrease in population over the last 50 years. But it also tells us that if you are a community in Turner County that is maintaining your population, like Centerville has done, then you are actually doing better than most. Centerville continues to hold their own when compared to the rest of the county. As you can see in the comparison, Dolton was the only community that actually gained in population from 2000 to 2015, but with their significantly smaller population one or two families in or out of town can really skew their percentage. Parker shows the least amount of population loss from 2000 to 2015 at -3.7%. After that it's Centerville and Irene tying with a -4.7% population loss during that stretch.

From 1960 until the present, Turner county as a whole has seen a -26.43% decrease in its population. During this stretch of time the population in the County went from 11,159 in 1960, to an estimated population of 8,209 in 2015. That is a staggering decrease! Several factors play a role in such a large decrease over the past 25 years. Some of the main reasons one could identify are lack of job creation, lack of desirable housing, and the migration of youth after high school to larger communities. Another key factor we can relate the decline to is the decrease in size of the average farm family and the continuing decline of small family farming operations in general. This has certainly played a role in many schools smaller class sizes in school districts throughout the County.

As for Centerville, we are all aware of the challenges we have faced this school year with its smaller class sizes in high school and lack of numbers for its varsity sports programs. These challenges left several families with children actively involved in varsity athletics with a tough decision of whether to stick it out in Centerville, or to look at other options for varsity sports through open enrollment. There were some obvious concerns in the beginning of the year for Centerville's future. If some left would others follow? What kind of ripple effect would it have? What would this mean for the future of not only the sports programs but for the school itself? As the school year has now played out, the community and school have dealt with these hurdles as best they can and even overcome some obstacles to grow stronger. We lost a few kids to open enrollment, but there was no mass exodus like some had feared and no talks of losing the school. In fact, despite those kids that we lost, the school's enrollment numbers are actually

up 8 students from the previous year K-12 because of the students we gained at the beginning of the year or have gained throughout the year so far. And as you can see, looking toward to the future, our classes sizes in PreK – 5<sup>th</sup> grade are almost ideal in class size, based on factors like student to teacher ratio and state funding dollars. All of these classes are close to approximately 20 to 25 kids per class. As one can see in the chart below, yes we are currently experiencing some below average class sizes in our high school, but the future certainly looks bright with the classes we have coming up.

Grade	Class Size	Boys	Girls
12 <sup>th</sup>	10	6	4
11 <sup>th</sup>	10	8	2
10 <sup>th</sup>	10	6	4
9 <sup>th</sup>	11	8	3
8 <sup>th</sup>	20	11	9
7 <sup>th</sup>	15	11	4
6 <sup>th</sup>	19	8	11
5 <sup>th</sup>	25	13	12
4 <sup>th</sup>	24	14	10
3 <sup>rd</sup>	21	10	11
2 <sup>nd</sup>	21	8	13
1 <sup>st</sup>	24	13	11
K	25	15	10
Pre-K	27	-	-

*Numbers provided by the Centerville School District*

### The Age Factor

Another telling statistic when trying to determine if a community is experiencing growth in population, or at least the likelihood of sustainability, is the average age of its citizens. You can tell a lot about where a community is headed based on the town’s median age. Are you attracting young adults with young children? As you can see in this chart Centerville is one of the few communities in Turner County that is actually getting younger. In fact, besides Centerville, the only other communities in Turner County that saw the average age in their community decrease from the years 2000 to 2014 were Dolton, Irene, Monroe and Parker. Based on these statistics Centerville is actually one of the younger communities in Turner County. That lower median age is another sign that younger people are being drawn to our community and want to live here.

Town	Median Age in 2000	Median Age in 2014
Centerville	44	38.9
Chancellor	32	38
Dolton	48	46
Hurley	41	42
Irene	47	38.1
Marion	44	55.6
Monroe	39	33.5
Parker	41	39.3
Viborg	47	51.3

*Statistics pulled and evaluated from Wikipedia.org and City-Data.com*

My hope with all these statistics and stories is that I have helped to better put things in perspective. What the current perception of Centerville might be versus what the reality is, and what the numbers tell us, might actually be two very different things. But numbers and statistics won't be enough alone. There is still work to be done and obstacles to overcome to help keep things moving in a positive direction. As citizens passionate about the survival of our school and our town, we need to be our own community's biggest cheerleaders. Together, we create the perception of our community and the way others will view it, by what we say and what we do. What will that perception be? Will it be one of a community that is dying, or of one that is vibrant and thriving?! This is a crucial time in Centerville's future. From this moment on, we as residents have the power to help shape the future of Centerville for the now, and for generations to come.