

Taxes, enrollment numbers force schools to merge

Written by Daniel Wheaton
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Eustis—When school consolidation came to Eustis and Farnam in 1996, residents had the chance to put their money where their mouths were.

Farnam, a town of fewer than 200 people today, in the southwestern corner of Dawson County roughly 20 miles south of Gothenburg, was struggling to keep its school afloat.

In 1996, there were fewer than 25 high school students and everyone was feeling the pinch through their property taxes. Just a 10-minute drive to the east, Eustis was in a similar situation. Even though it was the larger of the two communities, funds for the school were stretched. Collaboration seemed to be the only solution to both problems.

“There weren’t enough kids to justify the school,” said Kenneth Bellamy, a farmer and current Eustis-Farnam board member, remembering the consolidation talks that officially began in 1996. Seventeen years later, wounds caused by the merger have all healed.

As many people in both communities said, the Eustis-Farnam merger is a model case of a relatively painless transition. Tax issues, an election and constant communication from school officials helped bring nearly everyone to the table to discuss how a merger would be good for their wallets and for their students.

Property taxes were becoming high in the region. Before consolidation, Farnam’s school district levy was \$1.64 per \$100 of assessed property value, which was higher than Eustis’ at \$1.23.

In 1996, Gov. Ben Nelson signed a law that capped school district levies, beginning at \$1.10 and decreasing to \$1 several fiscal years later.

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Bellamy, who lives several miles north of Farnam, said taxes have been fairly low ever since the schools consolidated. According to the Dawson County assessor's office, the levy for the combined district is \$0.78.

In November of 1996 the Farnam superintendent, Joyce Huffman, called the merger "a vision for the future," during a public hearing. Since then, Huffman has retired and lives in Burwell, Neb. She said she remembered the merger fondly as it allowed her to promote additional programs that she didn't have the resources to pursue in Farnam. Huffman helped establish a Future Farmers of America program in the consolidated district, bringing Farnam's chapter to Eustis. Since then, Eustis-Farnam FFA has competed in the National FFA competition 13 out of the past 15 years and in 2006 became Food Science National Champions and Agronomy runners-up.

After months of dialogue between both school districts, each respective board decided to put the proposed merger plans to a vote. Huffman said she and other administrators went door-to-door in Farnam, and a similar effort was made in Eustis to make sure everyone understood the costs and benefits to both sides. On Oct. 28, 1996, the consolidation proposal was approved with 60 percent of the vote from both Eustis and Farnam. The original plan included having an elementary school at both sites, a junior high or high school in Farnam and a high school in Eustis. On Nov. 14, 1996, a public hearing was held to explain how the merged districts would move forward.

Before the consolidation that next school year, Eustis and Farnam began working together in athletics and academics. Some teachers worked at both districts and commuted during the day. Neither of the towns had enough students to sustain athletic teams, so the towns were forced to work together to keep those opportunities open to their students. One by one, the communities merged teams as numbers dwindled.

Dan Widick, a retired teacher who lives in Farnam and worked at Eustis for 40 years, said in the '90s, consolidation was always in the back of people's minds.

"The school is the social center of the community; when it goes away, it affects the dynamics of the community," Widick said.

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He said many tensions came from older residents, while the students were happy to have more people attending the school. The students voted on a new mascot--the Knights--and chose one color from each school: black and white.

“You go through a mourning process when you lose your school,” Widick said.

Bellamy said the consolidation didn't affect Farnam, although not holding certain school activities did keep some money from going to the town.

In the seven years he's been on the board, Bellamy said, “I haven't had a crank phone call.”

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