

Iowa learning center for sustainable farming folds

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At first glance, a learning center devoted to sustainable farming and fuel conservation should have done well in Iowa, a state known for its agriculture and wind turbines.

But the Burr Oak Center for Durable Culture on the edge of Turin folded late last month, less than two years after opening. Executive director Michael Luick-Thrams said community resistance to the center's mission was among the main reasons for the closure.



"It really says a lot about the country and where it is," he said.

But some experts say it's hard to introduce such enterprises in a community like Turin, a close-knit community in a sparsely populated part of western Iowa, about 50 miles northeast of Omaha.

"It takes a whole community to make something like that work," said Charlie Francis, an agronomist with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

He said community support is key to a successful sustainable movement, such as the one attempted by the Burr Oak Center-- and some communities are more receptive than others. He said that if organizers come from outside the community or aren't able to drum up support before establishing the movement, then it's unlikely to succeed.

The center, which was sponsored by TRACES Center for History and Culture, a St. Paul, Minn.-based organization that documents World War II-era stories from the Midwest, opened in fall 2009 in a house converted into dorms and class space. Luick-Thrams said staff resided on site, as did unpaid interns who trickled in from around the world to study organic and sustainable farming and alternate fuel sources. The center had a variety of livestock, including goats, pigs and chickens.

"Above all, we wanted to attract young people to get out and get their hands dirty," he said.

However, Luick-Thrams said, Turin residents spoke of the center as a hippie commune and speculated about whether it had ties to Islam -- neither of which were true. Neighbors were opposed to solar panels planned for the center, considering them eyesores, and complained about the long grass and the bevy of frogs, dragonflies and butterflies it attracted, he said.

The complaints grew louder and gained the support of Mayor David Poole and other community leaders, said Luick-Thrams, adding that attempts at outreach about the center's mission were not well received.

Calls to the Turin City Hall rang unanswered. A message left for a listing for Poole wasn't returned, nor was a message and e-mail for Monona County's top economic development official, Teresa Miller, who Luick-Thrams said was initially supportive of the center.

Luick-Thrams said the opposition was difficult to contend with as the center fought to attract employees and a steady stream of interns. He said the center may have done better had his group been able to purchase a nearby farm that was more secluded. But they couldn't come up with money for the 280-acre property before the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation bought it for conservation efforts in the Loess Hills.

Betty Wells, a sociology professor at Iowa State who specializes in agriculture, said she wasn't surprised by the community reaction.

"People do react that way to something that's different in their neighborhood," she said.

Wells said small farm operations do better in more urban areas and in places where residents have a higher income level. Otherwise, she said, it takes a lot more time to become accepted in the small community.

In hindsight, Luick-Thrams said, his group did pick a bad location for their center. He cited the county's aging demographics and low income level, both of which he said do not bode well for the future of sustainable farming. The latest census data indicates 24 percent of the county is age 65 or older and the average household income is almost \$39,000, with 40 percent of households getting Social Security income that, on average, totals almost \$14,000 a year.

"We learned a lot," Luick-Thrams said. "It's too bad the learning curve requires so much sacrifice and hard work. We have a huge task ahead, retooling not just rural America but the entire country."

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