

## Green plan shrouded in controversy

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JEFF BEIERMANN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Iowa native Michael Luick-Thrams wants to turn two properties near Turin, Iowa into a model of sustainable agriculture.

TURIN, Iowa — A Minnesota man would like to make a small pocket of the Loess Hills a living example of sustainable agriculture, renewable energy use and healthy lifestyles.

But some Turin-area residents fear that his true plans include a commune or even a cult.

Michael Luick-Thrams and his nonprofit organization, Traces, recently bought two homes outside Turin, population 67, with the intent of renovating the houses and launching long-term plans to buy more land for a larger sustainable living community. Turin is about 70 miles north of Omaha.

Some locals have responded with suspicion.

"I don't think anybody's in favor of having some group like this move into your community without any knowledge of who they are, or what their objectives are," said John Johnston, a local farmer.

Luick-Thrams has sponsored two community forums to discuss his plans, but both were sparsely attended, he said. He's concerned that some people are more interested in the rumor mill than a frank conversation.

Luick-Thrams, 47, a native Iowan, spent much of his life outside the state. Stints in New York City and San Francisco preceded eight years in Berlin, where he earned a doctorate in modern European history. He's been in St. Paul, Minn., since 2001.

For the last three years, he operated a museum there that focused on Midwest connections to World War II. Traces, the nonprofit, also displays museum exhibits through a traveling bus tour. It is a modest operation, functioning on \$100,000 to \$200,000 in recent years.

The mobile exhibits continue, but the museum closed its doors almost a year ago — a victim of the economy, Luick-Thrams said.

When that happened, the Traces board agreed on a new direction, one focused on America's use of nonrenewable energy.

"I can no longer in good conscience talk about a crisis of 70 years ago," said Luick-Thrams, referring to the war. "Now we have a crisis that threatens ecological health everywhere."

The board developed a plan for the Turin project, which includes turning the two homes near town into a "campus" to teach college students or train those interested in sustainable living.

Luick-Thrams, who grew up near Clear Lake, fell in love with the beauty of the Loess Hills. He said he also chose Turin because he believes the area operates on an economic model that relies too much on oil.

The plan includes purchasing farmland that would allow the community to raise livestock and grow food — enough to feed whoever lives there. The rest could be sold at farmers markets or through other venues, like community-supported agriculture where people buy shares, or pay a subscription fee, in exchange for fresh farm food.

Who would live on the property has not been settled, said Luick-Thrams, but the community could include interns and long-term residents who serve as farmers, cooks and bakers, among other positions.

Right now, it's still a dream. The number of people staying at the two properties is never more than a handful, Luick-Thrams said, and they have their hands full cleaning up the run-down homes.

But the prospect of 20, 30 or more people living and working together near Turin strikes some area residents as strange.

"It's a little bit scary," said Johnston, the local farmer.

Luick-Thrams said he's been called a hippie intent on starting a cult. He's heard that his father is a rich Des Moines legislator. Neither of those rumors is true, he said. His late father was a farmer.

Another rumor is that Traces is a church. The group has been registered as a nonprofit organization with the Iowa secretary of state since 2001.

Besides the rumors, Luick-Thrams said several uninvited guests have stopped by his property — most stop to gawk, but one man walked unannounced into one of the homes.

Fed up with the negative attention, Luick-Thrams wrote a letter to a local newspaper, urging people to call him with their questions.

He also changed his Web site in an effort to tamp down the talk. Users now need a password to access most content.

Previously on his Web site, he detailed plans to purchase land owned by a local family, David and Lin Zahrt, and referred to the couple as advisers. Plans to buy the land fell through, but many locals still think the farm was sold to Traces. A search of Iowa Land Records shows that the Zahrt land has not been sold.

The farm is for sale, according to both Luick-Thrams and David Zahrt, but Traces doesn't have the money to buy it.

"I think he's got a magnificent project," said Zahrt. "He just isn't and can't purchase our farm."

That might calm Johnston, whose land abuts Zahrt's farm. Several locals interviewed were reluctant to be identified publicly but said they have the same fears as Johnston.

Even if the only new thing that comes to the area is organic farming, Johnston said that could cause problems if Luick-Thrams objects to chemicals drifting over to his fields.

"If they're organic . . . how do I operate my operation as a farmer with chemicals?" asked Johnston.

Johnston may not have to answer that question.

Luick-Thrams said last week that the negative reaction is wearing on him.

"This has been a painful experience," Luick-Thrams said. "We came here to do good, and the local reaction is mystifying."

"I haven't given up yet, but where's the encouragement? Why would we stay?"

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