In today’s world, it takes an engaged community to keep a rural city viable. Citizens often look to city government to take the lead. In Correctionville, a city with a population of 821 in northwest Iowa, private citizens led the charge to rebuild a grocery store in the community.

After a fire in September 2009, the owners of the community’s long-time grocery store decided not to rebuild. After living two years with the nearest grocery store 14 miles away in Holstein, a group of concerned citizens formed the non-profit Correctionville Economic Development Corporation, Inc (CEDCORP) as a 501(c)(3) to study the problem. Their first step was to gauge interest.

“We held a community meeting. We wanted to know whether people were interested in getting a store,” Mike Smith, a CEDCORP committee member, said. “The committee members felt if you lose your grocery store, you start shopping elsewhere. The first thing you know, your town slowly dies.”

The community responded with an initial pool of private donations toward the project. With the community behind the concept, CEDCORP began exploring the project more fully. City Council Member Brad Knaack, who also serves on the CEDCORP Board of Directors, said the initial investigation did not bode well for rebuilding the burned store. “CEDCORP analyzed everything,” Knaack said. “The old building was just not economically feasible – it was too old, too small, it didn’t accommodate trucks, the cooler systems were outdated. We decided to build a new one.”

The hunt began for a new building site, additional funding and someone to run the store. The city approached a private land owner who held a parcel of land that was key to developing a vacant lot for the grocery store site. A land swap was developed to give the city the last parcel needed for the favored store site, which was then donated to the project. CEDCORP was also able to work out a loan-grant package with Woodbury County and a low-interest loan from Correctionville. With the majority of the finances squared away, Correctionville’s new community project began to take shape.

“Much of the store was built with volunteer labor. CEDCORP was the general contractor,” Knaack said. “The construction went pretty well. Mike did a good job pushing things a long, saying ‘we gotta work on this, every week something has got to get done.’”

As the end of the project drew near, funding got tight. CEDCORP approached the city for assistance for the last stage of what would be a $400,000 project. Using a trust fund left to the city for community projects by Hazel Welsch in 1987, the council donated the last $34,000 needed to finish the Correctionville Mercantile. The store was sold on contract to an owner/manager and opened in early 2013, even offering a home delivery service.

Mayor Nathan Heilman was a Correctionville council member while the store was being built. “I think the way the community responded goes to show how important it was to have a grocery store—kind of an identity of sorts,” he said. “Every town wants to have a post office, a grocery store and a swimming pool, I think. Those are the things people look for when they look at a small town – what does it have to offer.”

Category: Population Less Than 3,000

The All-Star Community Awards acknowledge and encourage excellence and innovation in local government. Five awards were given in 2014: one in three population categories and two special recognitions of service sharing and sustainability.

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