**For Release Wednesday, February 14, 2024**

**Capitol View
Commentary by J.L. Schmidt
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**I’m Not Sure That I Love This Program**

I’m sure that a year ago the Revitalize Rural Nebraska Grant Program proposed by Sen. Myron Dorn of Adams and passed by the Legislature sounded like a great deal.

Administered by the Department of Environment and Energy, it’s intended to provide money to help towns under 5,000 populations with the cost of clearing away rundown buildings. Some consideration is allegedly given to historic properties. But there’s nothing really being done to address the root cause of the dilapidation.

Dorn’s heart is in the right place. He wants the funds to help the communities get those buildings so they’re not eyesores. “That when people drive by, they go, ‘boy that makes our town not look very good.’” The department is accepting grant applications through this month.

Dorn hopes a lot of towns apply so he can show the Legislature that more than the $1 million originally allocated is needed. If it is, he’d like to expand the program so larger cities, like Beatrice in his district, could apply. Folks in that southeast Nebraska city want to get rid of the old Dempster windmill factory.

C.B. Dempster founded the Dempster Mill Manufacturing Company in 1878 because he believed selling windmills to farmers was a prosperous and growing industry. Farmers needed water and the Dempster Mill Manufacturing Company could supply the equipment. The business expanded into farm machinery in 1897. C. B. Dempster ran the company until his death in 1933. The company existed under different owners after that and produced windmills until 2009.

“When I was a little boy, that was running three shifts, and then I saw it stop,” Beatrice City Councilman Ted Fairbanks recently told a reporter for KOLN TV in Lincoln.

That story caught my attention as I remembered that the Dempster whistle was my alarm clock when I lived nearby as I did my summer newspaper internship in Beatrice decades ago. That, and the black iron Dempster short- tailed horse windmill balance that has rested for years on my fireplace hearth.

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The TV reporter said over the last decade, Dempster has become a dumpster. A labyrinthine cavern of pitch- black corridors with scenes frozen in time from its heyday.

“It’s the first thing when you come to town from this side,” Chet McGrury, the Beatrice Community Development Director, said. “You know, you get an impression, first impression that, ‘Ooo, things aren’t so great here, possibly.’” So, Beatrice leaders are looking for money to transform the ruins into a green space.

Nebraska communities have been tearing down old buildings and replacing them with downtown green spaces for years. Slap some paint on the wall of the closest adjacent building, paint a mural on it, lay down some sod and install a couple benches.

“Even to get this back to just a nice green space, another park,” McGrury said. “Something that just is not a an ugly, rotting building.”

Stop right there. Imagine what all that money could be used for to help communities that don't have enough money to save buildings that people WANT to save?

Look at the remnants of old automobile factories that are being refurbished nationwide as housing and retail developments. Imagine some of the oldest Dempster buildings being used for an interpretive center to explain how water and irrigation made the area thrive. Imagine them as a venue for maker spaces or craft fairs and festivals.

Use some of that “demolition money” instead to advertise the space available and attract developers. That market doesn’t belong exclusively to the big cities. Get creative.

The dilapidated buildings are a monument to municipalities for their failure to hold derelict property owners accountable. It’s a statewide problem and local ordinances holding landlords and property owners’ feet to the fire to keep buildings viable are the answer here.

Stop wasting taxpayer dollars to tear down buildings and look for people who want to invest in those buildings and keep them filled with vibrant businesses and activities and on the tax rolls.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for 25 years.*