***For Release Week of July 29, 2024***

**All Things Nebraska**

Paul Hammel, retired senior reporter for Nebraska Examiner

**Could Nebraska become a destination for 'climate migrants?'**

Rural communities across Nebraska have struggled with population loss for decades.

The last census indicated that of the state’s 93 counties, 69 had lost population between 2010 and 2020. A University of Nebraska at Omaha study in 2015 made a sobering projection that only 12 counties in the state would have more residents in 2050 than in 1990.

That continues a slide in rural areas that’s been occurring since the settlement days.

Near a family farm we have in northeast Nebraska, you can scan the valley and count the farmsteads that are no longer there, or are largely abandoned.

 The population of the nearby towns is slowly declining, and several, once solid, Main Street businesses have closed up.

But recently, a couple of East Coast academics offered a glimmer of hope for resettlement and revitalization of rural communities in Nebraska and elsewhere in the Midwest.

Climate change -- and the resulting rise in global sea levels and increase in extreme weather events like floods, hurricanes and drought -- will force people to flee from some areas, especially near the coasts.

And Nebraska, where climate changes might not be as dire, could be a beneficiary of a wave of “climate migrants.”

Daniel Brown, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate now a professor emeritus at Toronto University, and Hillary Brown, a professor emeritus of architecture who used to lead an urban sustainability program at the City College of New York, penned an article in 2021 entitled, “How managed retreat from climate change could revitalize rural America.”

They maintain that between 4 million and 13 million people living in coastal cities in the U.S. will seek new homes at “climate havens” such as Nebraska, where towns are safe, where housing is affordable and there are available jobs — some 72,000 unfilled jobs in Nebraska, said one attendee of the presentation at UNL’s Morrill Hall.

***All Things Nebraska - For Release Week of July 29, 2024 – Page 2***

Brown urged the 25 people who attended their presentation to “think ahead,” decide if they want to host some of these new settlers, and start developing amenities to attract such migrants.

Climate migrants will seek communities that are welcoming, have good schools, available housing and safe streets, they said. They want towns that have, or will be close to, sites for culture, entertainment and nature.

Communities, the two academics said, might attract more new residents if they have progressive leaders who have made adjustments to climate change by adopting “green” technologies that preserve water quality and energy resilience.

One attendee, Chuck Hassebrook, the long-time, former director of the Center for Rural Affairs, added that communities need to be “interesting” to new residents. Think in terms of hike/bike trails, kayaking opportunities, and historic main streets with quaint shops and cafes.

Nebraska already has some communities like this.

Norfolk recently opened a “whitewater park” that dissects the northeast Nebraska city, turning a once placid branch of the Elkhorn River into an enjoyable and, at times, challenging float trip through a series of rapids.

Ord was cited at the symposium as a community where strong leadership has led to success.

It began in the 1990s when the town’s leaders fought the closing of the local hospital, a major employer. It is now a thriving medical center.

A 1% local sales tax was imposed to provide seed money for local entrepreneurs. The result: more than $6.2 million in loans to 68 local businesses in Valley County, resulting in more than $19 million in development, according to a 2022 article by The Journal of the Kansas Leadership Center.

It hasn’t spawned a jump in local population, but has increased a key demographic group — the number of young people and families, ages 30-34, by 54% between 2000 and 2010.

So things are happening in some communities, and Brooks and Brown urged more communities to join in.

***All Things Nebraska - For Release Week of July 29, 2024 – Page 3***

Of course, not everyone agrees with their belief that there will be a big rush of climate migrants that will reach the fertile hills of Nebraska.

Others think that any migration will be more local, within a coastal region, rather than across the country, and that estimates of a mass migration are inflated.

And most people move for better, usually higher paying, jobs, which have always been the brass ring state leaders, have been seeking to grab for Nebraska.

But it’s certainly something to think about.

  I’m always amazed at the cool things happening in small towns and cities across the state — new brewpubs and restaurants, fancy golf courses and coffee shops, and new attractions like that Whitewater Park.

Whether Nebraska becomes a destination for climate migrants or not, we just need more of them.

-- 30 --

*Paul Hammel has covered the Nebraska state government and the state for decades. He retired in April as senior contributor with the Nebraska Examiner. He was previously with the Omaha World-Herald, Lincoln Journal Star and Omaha Sun.  A native of Ralston, Nebraska, he loves traveling and writing about the state.*