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Elba officials may exile water tower to the scrap heap

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ELBA, Neb. — Elba's water tower has become something of a Rorschach test for the town's residents.

As town officials consider whether to tear down the 73-year old tower, some see it as an essential identifying point for Elba as drivers approach on Highway 11 in western Howard County.

"I don't see too many towns without water towers. It's a landmark," said Charlotte Rasmussen, a member of the Village Board. "I just think it's a little piece of history, and once it's gone, it's gone."

Others see the same empty tower as a potential drag on the village's limited financial resources.

"To me, it was a no-brainer," said Dallas Donscheski, also on the Village Board. "We've got other places to spend money other than the water tower."

The town of about 250 has been split over the matter since the board voted in March to have the tower razed. Now, a July deadline to decide on accepting federal grant money for the tower's demolition is approaching, and the board is preparing to revisit the thorny question.

The 35,000-gallon tower became obsolete in February, when the village installed a new 85,000-gallon storage tank on a hill south of town.

The new tank was part of an overhaul of the water system required in order to meet the village's demands for firefighting, said Village Engineer Jeff Palik of Olsson Associates.

The project's original plans called for a 55,000-gallon tank to be used along with the water tower, but engineers determined during planning that because of the new tank's height, expensive equipment would have been needed to prevent too much water from flowing into the water tower, Palik said.

Instead, the tower was taken offline this spring when the tank was installed.

Village officials had been planning to keep the tower until officials from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which funded much of the water project, informed them that USDA could provide a grant to cover all of the tower's demolition, estimated at about \$30,000 to \$35,000.

Keeping the tower up would require repainting about every 15 years, starting with a new paint job soon, Palik said. That task would cost about \$35,000, including sandblasting surface rust on the tower.

With no opposition from the public, the board voted 3 to 1 in March to take down the tower. Rasmussen said she had no idea the board was going to vote at that meeting and was absent.

At the next month's meeting, Rasmussen and several residents urged the board to reconsider the vote. They offered to conduct a survey of the town's property owners to gauge public opinion. The survey's results are scheduled to be presented at a special meeting Tuesday.

Rasmussen and others in the group expressed frustration that the board conducted the vote without the public's knowledge.

"I don't think anybody was prepared for what was going to happen," said Darrell Conway, coordinator of the survey. "They just assumed (the tower) was going to stand."

Others said they were taken aback by concern for the tower, particularly when keeping it would mean more spending.

"I'm really surprised at the emotional attachment to that tower," said Village Clerk Arlene Johnson. "It became an emotional issue."

From the south, the tower can be seen above the trees as visitors arrive at Elba, the first town they come to in the Loup River Valley. For those arriving from the north, it's visible for several miles. Donscheski said the tower may be widely visible, but that doesn't necessarily make it a landmark. He suggested that the vast majority of people in nearby towns have hardly paid attention to Elba's water tower.

"Nobody's going to come driving into town and say 'I want to see that water tower,' " he said.

With the deadline approaching for the town to accept or reject the USDA's offer of a demolition grant, Palik said it would be unlikely that the town would get another chance for such funds.

Next month's vote will also be complicated by the recent resignations of two board

members.

Tony Morrow quit at this month's meeting. Mark Wilson, who was the lone vote against tearing down the tower, submitted a letter to the village Thursday, announcing his resignation as of Wednesday.

Morrow said his resignation was not related to the water tower matter. He said he is too busy to serve on the board.

Wilson, in his letter, said he felt he was doing Elba's citizens "a great disservice by not being able to devote enough time to the board."

He expressed dissatisfaction in vague terms with the board's conduct, writing: "There are many issues that have come before the Village Board that I don't feel we are acting on in an adequate time frame."

On Friday, after the letter had been received by the village office, Wilson did not return a phone call seeking comment.

Though only three board members remain, Morrow's successor is scheduled to be appointed on Tuesday. Still, next month's vote is even more up in the air than it was before.

"That kind of leaves us in a pickle," Rasmussen said.

Though the situation was tense last week, several opponents of demolishing the tower said they were prepared to accept the board's outcome.

"Whatever's decided is decided, and then we'll go on," Rasmussen said. "Whatever the vote comes out, I'll live with it."