

OTHER NEWS

A rural nonprofit grocery store is closing in Kansas, showing how hard it is to fight food deserts



Cara Cain, manager for the rural grocery store Grand Avenue Market in Plains, helps a customer check out. The store is set to close by the end of the month. CALEN MOORE/KNS

BY CALEN MOORE

HPPR/Kansas News Service

Rural communities have been turning to nonprofits and other strategies to keep grocery stores open. But one of those new stores is closing in Kansas, which shows how challenging it can be to provide food in small towns.

PLAINS - It's hard for Cara Cain to decide what she will miss most.

She's the manager at Grand Avenue Market, a local nonprofit grocery store opened in 2021 that is set to close this month.

Maybe it will be the customers and interacting with locals as they stop by. Or maybe her coworkers she has grown close to. Later, she mentions the special produce she has ordered for customers, like cactus, and thinks she will miss having access to the grocery store herself.

"Unfortunately, there was just no other options right now. We're really hoping a miracle happens because it's been really helpful to the community as a whole," Cain said.

Prices are up for rural grocers, margins are thin, staff are hard to find and transportation costs are higher for small-town stores. Communities across Kansas have been attempting new ways to fill in the grocery gaps.

But some of those solutions are coming up short.

More than 30 percent of Kansas counties are struggling to keep their grocery stores open and stocked, creating so-called "food deserts."

Plains just a few years ago was an example of a solution. Community members opted for an alternative business model — a nonprofit — run by a board of directors that could pour all the revenue back into the grocery store.

"It was really community driven. We would order things for the local school. We were a

convenient place for senior citizens," Cain said. "I'm just really going to miss it."

Without the store, the town of Plains, with a population of about 1,000 people, will have to rely on what they can find at gas stations or drive to the nearest town.

Rosalia Sanchez is a frequent shopper in Plains. She said now she will have to go anywhere from 15 miles to 60 miles to get groceries for her family.

"I'd have to try to get everything I can in one haul and hope I won't run out until the next haul," Sanchez said.

Focusing on community health and needs, rather than profit, are some ways small towns have kept their aging residents fed. Other ideas that have caught on in Kansas are nonprofits and cooperatives, or co-ops.

Co-ops are a familiar business model in rural areas thanks to the agriculture industry. Local community members buy shares of the grocery store to fund it, and the store is then run by a board of directors locally elected.

But the problem some towns like Plains have run into is these alternative business methods still need to be profitable at a basic level.

Rial Carver works closely with rural grocery stores as the project manager for the Rural Grocery Initiative at Kansas State University. She said that the Plains store did not work out long-term, but the nonprofit grocery model can still work.

"You're still going to be operating on razor thin margins, but creative ownership models redistribute the burden," Carver said.

It's risky business to run a grocery store in a rural town. Redistributing the burden allows for small towns to take those risks and receive more investors. The Rural Grocery Initiative has tried to help by offering grants to rural



Casey Venters and his son measure wood used in the window frames of the store being built in Dighton. CALEN MOORE/KNS

stores.

Nonprofit grocery stores run off the investment from the community and grants. But like with any other nonprofit, sometimes there is not enough support to keep the lights on, and food stocked.

Plains voted in November 2023 to reject a half-cent sales tax that would have helped pay off a federal loan used to build the store.

"Ownership model options that fall outside the norm are only as strong as what the community will support," Carver said.

That's why towns in rural Kansas have pushed for community-minded solutions.

Deborah Solie works for the Center for Rural Affairs in Nebraska. She said these nontraditional grocery stores encourage more local support from residents.

"They're invested, and they're more likely to purchase from that grocery store in the future because they see the benefits," Solie said.

Solie has seen other ideas take off in the Midwest, like schools partnering and running local grocery stores, or membership models that run similar to a gym.

These models haven't taken off so much in Kansas, but as towns get desperate, they might look into paid membership or schools partnering with grocery stores. These ideas not only tackle the profit problem, but also the labor problem, keeping the

rural stores staffed.

Similar to farm trends, aging local grocery store owners do not usually have transition plans, leading them to potentially close after that owner retires. According to a 2021 survey, about 25% of rural grocery store owners were of retirement age, and most of them had no contingency plan.

Solie said that if rural communities can support these different models, they should. But she also said it would help if the state offers financial support.

A big piece of the current approach to rural grocery stores is summits and talking to each other, seeing what works in other towns and what hasn't.

"Not every solution is right for each community, but I think there's something to be learned from each of these stories," Solie said.

While some towns in Kansas are losing their grocery store, others are trying to build one.

Lane County Community Foundation Executive Director Casey Venters will tell you it's not a small task. He grew up in Dighton, Kansas, right in the middle of the county.

He is personally overseeing the building of a new grocery store, taking measurements and writing them down with the pencil that sticks out of his ball cap.

As of now, the county has no grocery store. Churches and volunteers

The community foundation ownership model is another strategy small towns can try.

The store has so far kept building costs low by acquiring shelving and refrigeration supplies from a local dollar store liquidation sale.

Venters says he is not concerned by stores closing in similar towns, like Plains.

"We have spent countless hours and weeks and months studying the math. Business comes down to math," Venters said.

Venters hopes the model they're using can be another nontraditional solution that communities could copy to open badly needed grocery stores.

Venters said he hopes to have the store open by Memorial Day weekend this year.

"I call it the three-legged stool for rural communities to be sustainable. The first is a hospital, the second is a school and that third is food access," Venters said. "The minute that a small community loses one of those three legs, that's sayonara."

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