

Iowa Town Recovering From Slaughterhouse Immigration Raid

POSTVILLE, Iowa (AP) — Life in Postville wasn't easy before federal agents raided the area's largest employer and detained 389 people on immigration charges.

The May 2008 raid on the Agriprocessors slaughterhouse came as the nationwide recession was deepening and the city was struggling to cope with some of the long-term economic problems many rural Midwestern communities face.

The string of bad news that followed — bankruptcy, the arrest of senior managers, the exodus of hundreds of other immigrant workers and a failed attempt to keep the plant running with out-of-state workers — left both town and plant as shadows of their former selves, with Postville's population about half its pre-raid size and the kosher slaughterhouse's staff about one-tenth its former size.

There is cautious hope that the expected approval Wednesday of the sale of the plant to SHF Industries, a subsidiary to Canadian plastics maker Hershey Friedman, will bring people back to fill the city's vacated storefronts and homes.

"It's been sort of like living every day not know what's going to be tomorrow," former City Council member Aaron Goldsmith said.

But that hope is tempered by concern over who the plant will hire and how it will treat its employees. And amid a recession and worrying demographic trends facing many rural communities, many say it will take much more than a restarted plant to invigorate Postville.

The immigration raid — the largest of its kind in Iowa history — tore deeply at the city's social fabric, which had been a unique blend of longtime white residents, Latinos from Mexico and Guatemala, and Hasidic Jews. The raid separated families as workers were jailed and then deported, and it led to the departure of many Latinos who had lived in Postville for years.

Many residents who remain have no interest in slaughterhouse work because of their age or a simple distaste for the often repetitive and messy jobs.

Since the raid, unemployment has risen in Clayton and Allamakee counties, which Postville straddles, has climbed and in May stood at 7 percent, compared to 5.8 percent statewide. Postville's population has dwindled from 3,000 to about 1,800 residents, city official Darcy Radloff said. And the factory has been limping on with a staff of about 100, down from 1,000 before the raid.

"We're struggling," said the Rev. Paul Ouderkirk, whose St. Bridget's Catholic Church has helped many former plant workers and their families pay their rent and

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bills so they could remain in Postville.

"They were subsisting, making it work (before the raid)," Ouderkirk said. "Now they can't pay for water. They can't pay for phones. They're trying to keep the lights on."

The plant sale offers the hope of new jobs, and although the plant's image took a beating because of the raid and the allegations against Agriprocessors' owners, its reputation among residents could improve with a new owner, Ouderkirk said.

"I see them being hesitant," Ouderkirk said. "I do see them giving it a try."

The region has been slowly losing population for decades as more people chose cities over rural life, so the new plant owners will likely have to bring in workers from elsewhere, said Michele Devlin, a University of Northern Iowa professor co-writing a book on Postville's struggles with immigration and its rural economy.

"We have a very real problem for labor in this state for these kinds of jobs," Devlin said. "We have a rapidly aging population among whites, half of college graduates leave the state...we basically have no growth within our own population."

Agriprocessors tried busing in contract workers to fill its staff after the raid, but residents complained the new workers had no ties to Postville and caused a spike in fights and petty crimes. Most left after only weeks, and city officials have said they're opposed to the plant's new owners trying another such move.

"The City Council has made it very clear that they do not want to see the bringing in of a transient population again," Radloff said. "We expect to get a good corporate citizen that pays competitive wages, that treats employees fair and provides jobs."

Geraldo Solovi-Perez, 18, who lost his Agriprocessors job after the raid but was ordered to remain in Postville because he's a potential witness in the cases against some former managers, said he's had no luck getting another job and would love to be rehired by the new owners.

"I applied to a lot of places, but I haven't heard back," said Solovi-Perez, who entered the country illegally but has been allowed to get another job while awaiting the trials.

Another Agriprocessors asset, the Local Pride meatpacking plant in Gordon, Neb., is not a part of the sale and will be sold separately.

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