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Kan. Offers Free Land to Lure Residents

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Mar 23, 2:03 PM (ET)

By CARL MANNING

MARQUETTE, Kan. (AP) - Dean and Jennifer Krehbiel are modern-day pioneers on the prairie. The couple are building a home in this small rural town after being offered free land as part of a giveaway aimed at revitalizing Marquette.

The idea was borrowed from the homesteading days of the 1800s, when the promise of land for the taking brought settlers by the droves to the Great Plains.

"It was enough of a bonus to allow us to look at the option of building. It sure caught our interest," said Dean Krehbiel, a U.S. Department of Agriculture conservationist who was looking for a small town near his job in Salina, 30 miles from Marquette.

The Krehbiels moved here from the Wichita area, and their two children, ages 6 and 9, are going to the local grade school. That makes Marquette Mayor Steve Piper a happy man.



(AP) Dean Krehbiel works on a shed behind his new home which is being built in Marquette, Kan. Thursday,...

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"In a small community, you have to keep the school system. Every child you bring in is more money for the schools. The schools are the backbone of the community," said Piper, a third-generation grocer in this town of about 600.

Many Plains towns are struggling to survive. Young people leave, old people die, and storefronts become boarded up one by one.

Marquette is among at least 10 Kansas communities offering free land to attract residents to boost school enrollment and fatten the tax base. Most such programs started in the past year or two, so it is too soon to measure long-term success.

Success, however, depends on what they can offer besides land.

"If the town doesn't have much to offer in the first place - pretty much the definition of a declining town - this approach is unlikely to make any difference. It sounds like a desperation move: 'Please, pretty please come live in our town,'" said Frank Popper, an urban studies professor

at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Popper, who spent years studying Plains population decline, said similar programs have been tried in North Dakota, Minnesota and South Dakota, "but I haven't heard that there have been many takers or noticeable results."

Also, Congress is considering a homesteading law to reward people who relocate to rural areas with tax breaks and other economic incentives.

Marquette has a few things other rural towns don't. It has a downtown that is alive - a dozen well-kept storefronts, some with architecture from the 1880s. It boasts a bank, cafe, furniture store, motorcycle museum, soda fountain and gift shop, art gallery, a couple of bars and Piper's grocery.

It does not have many jobs to offer. But it is less than an hour's drive from three good-sized cities - Salina, Hutchinson and Wichita.

"We have tried bringing jobs to this town, but you might as well bang your head against a brick wall," the mayor said. "We decided it was better to bring in the families and let them work in the surrounding communities. We'll let them find the jobs - we'll provide the housing."

The land giveaway began last May, after the town bought 50 acres of farmland and divided it into 80 building lots, valued around \$8,000 each. So far, 21 lots have been handed out, all but one of them to newcomers.

The town built the streets in the new neighborhood - which is situated near the town's rodeo arena - and provided the water, electric, sewer and gas hookups. The only requirement is landholders must build a house within a year and live in it for a year.

So far, four \$100,000 three-bedroom homes have been built, and construction is about to start on six more. The Krehbiels hope to be in their new home in April; they are living in rented quarters in the meantime.

The Krehbiels were drawn here by the prospect of living in the kind of place where folks sit on their front porches to enjoy the spring breeze at night.

"I just like the small town for the fact you know people a lot better and they tend to help out more when there is a need. We like being part of the community," said Jennifer Krehbiel, who like her husband grew up in small Kansas towns.

The mayor said he hopes to have all the lots given away by the end of 2005. He said each house will add about \$1,000 in tax revenue for a



(AP) Jennifer and Dean Krehbiel, with their children Shealee, left, and Colter, right, stand in front of...

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town with a \$350,000 annual budget.

The families moving in so far have 26 children. The town has just 127 students in the elementary school, so the homesteading program has created a population boom in the classroom.

"Who knows what it will be like in 10 years if we don't do something?" the mayor said. "We didn't want to just sit here and watch the town get smaller."

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