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Small Minburn lays out big entertainment plans

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Minburn, Ia. - Kevin Coble moved here a month ago from the East Coast. Already, he sees a lot to like.

"The people are nice," said Coble, who is 39 and lives on the edge of town. "It's clean, it's safe and the cost of living is lower than a lot of places."

Despite those qualities, Minburn, which long called itself "a small town with big heart," has lost about half its inhabitants since the mid-20th century, according to City Clerk Richard Buscher.

The situation is similar elsewhere in Iowa, where 440 incorporated towns have fewer than 1,000 residents. Many of these communities face an ongoing, uphill battle against shrinking tax bases for public services.

Minburn, with its population of 400, is attempting to cope with new fiscal realities by rolling out a new welcome-mat initiative that rural development experts are characterizing as fascinating and ambitious considering the town is so small.

Meet Me in Minburn, a new series of nine live entertainment events, will be staged for the first time Saturday and continue monthly through Nov. 15.

The idea is to open the town to visitors, who will buy some of the food or drink that will be sold to raise money for local institutions, such as the fire department, library and elementary school, said Jen Heims, 35, an organizer and also a member of the Minburn Betterment Group.

"With only 400 residents, there's only so much money here to go around," she said.

The first event, at 7 p.m. Saturday at the Minburn United Methodist Church Hall, will feature Fairfield-based folk singer Sharon Bousquet in a coffeehouse setting. Beginning June 21, Meet Me in Minburn will move outdoors to the town park, a place that once attracted thousands of people to its outdoor Big Heart Roller Rink Stage.

The newcomer, Coble, who is a professional stuntman, will be involved in one of the events. His company, JoustEvolution, performs at Renaissance festivals around the nation, so on Aug. 16 he'll stage a Wild West show.

"This is a fascinating story," said Cornelia Butler Flora, a distinguished professor of sociology and agriculture and life sciences at Iowa State University.

"Historically, small towns have generated festivals that bring in outsiders," she said. "These are usually exhausting, once-a-year events.

"What's unique about Minburn is that it is small and it is putting on a series of events," Flora said.

Heims sees it as a matter of pragmatism. "When you're a small town, you just have to do some things differently to draw people," she said.

Other Iowa towns sponsor regular events, but these communities tend to be larger. Perry, just north of Minburn, offers entertainment at Friday Fest. In eastern Iowa, Fairfield's First Friday Art Walk has become very popular in the past few years. Both Perry and Fairfield are home to more than 8,000 residents.

Minburn's game plan has a good chance of succeeding, said Flora, director of the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, one of four regional centers coordinating rural development research and education throughout the United States.

"If local people show up and invite their friends, these events that are close to a major urban area have a good chance of bringing in a crowd, especially of generating regulars," she said. "I suspect it will definitely earn money for the civic organizations participating."

Meet Me in Minburn represents an ambitious beginning for a small town, said Richard Pirog of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture.

"Down the road, they should look toward working with other towns that are close by so people have multiple destinations in one area," Pirog said.

In the meantime, small communities such as Minburn have enough inherent qualities to be appealing to visitors, especially those who are not from a small town.

"Iowa was built on small towns with welcoming family traditions," Pirog said. "What the Minburns can do is carry that tradition on so other generations can experience it."

Meet Me in Minburn

WHAT: A series of nine live entertainment events between Saturday and Nov. 15.

WHERE: Saturday's 7 p.m. concert featuring Sharon Bousquet will be at the Minburn United Methodist Church Hall. Events on Oct. 18 and Nov. 15 will also be at the church.

Events on June 21, July 3, July 4 (an all-day celebration), July 19, Aug. 16 and Sept. 20 will be at the Big Heart Roller Rink Stage in the town park.

TICKETS: \$5 for indoor events. Admission is free for the outdoor events.

INFO: www.minburn.org

Graphic Map The Register (location of Minburn)

Photos By: Christopher Gannon/The Register

Rich Buscher and Jen Heims helped organize Meet Me in Minburn, a series of events partnered with local community groups to bring people to the town.

A tractor rumbles south on U.S. Highway 169 south of Minburn on Wednesday. The town is staging a series of live entertainment events this year that rural development experts characterize as fascinating and ambitious given the town's small population. Christopher

A semitrailer is filled with grain by Joseph Miles, on top platform, while David Meyers watches at the Heartland Co-op elevator in Minburn on Wednesday. The Minburn Community Betterment Group is hosting Meet Me in Minburn this year, a series of events partnered with local community groups to bring people to enjoy small-town life.

A sign along U.S. Highway 169 welcomes motorists to Minburn. The town is having its first entertainment event of the year Saturday.