



'Agrihood' may be moving in

BY DONNELLE ELLER
Associated Press

CUMMING, Iowa — Steve Bruere asks if he should dress like a farmer or a developer when he meets up with a photographer.

The 38-year-old is joking. He rarely strays far from an unremarkable suit and cowboy boots that take him from farmland auctions to corporate offices.

But the question is appropriate: Bruere and his partners want to build what amounts to a small town on about 400 acres near Cumming, with an organic vegetable farm, vineyard, orchard and residential gardens anchoring the massive home, condo, apartment and retail development.

If the Cumming City Council green-lights the roughly \$260 million project next month, the Middlebrook development could be Iowa's first "agrihood," a planned community anchored by a working farm or community gardens.

More than 200 agrihoods have popped up across the country, a trend that appeals to consumers who want a slice of country life — big gardens, nature and outdoor recreation — near urban centers.

"The problem with suburban neighborhoods is that to get to anything other than more houses, you have to drive," said Adam Mekies, associate at Design Workshop in Aspen, Colorado, an architectural firm that's designed several agrihoods.

"Instead of pushing agriculture farther and farther

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Neighbors and fellow farmers help load cattle at North-Creek Dairy, which is owned by the Hoffman family near Chatfield. The roof of the family's barn collapsed under the weight of more than a foot of snow.

Roof collapse forces family to sell dairy herd

BY NOAH FISH
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CHATFIELD — A powerful snowstorm to wrap up February brought an end to much more than just a snowy month.

A fifth-generation family dairy farm was forced to sell its cows after its barn roof collapsed. At least 12 roofs collapsed under nearly a foot of snow that fell Feb. 23-24, followed by howling winds. It was a combination that brought all of southeastern and south-central Minnesota to a standstill.

The Hoffman family, named Olmsted County's Farm Family of the Year in 2018, operates North-Creek Dairy in Chatfield.

When a second section of roofing on the barn that housed all 450 of their cows collapsed on Feb. 26, the Hoffmans were pushed to sell their entire herd.

"We just decided it's time to get these cows out of here and safe," Gary Hoffman said. "We found a buyer, and they're going to a real good home."

Three hundred cows were sold to a dairy farm in Lake City, and the rest will be dispersed to various farms in the Lanesboro area. Quickly after they were milked on Feb. 26, the cows were loaded into trailers and taken from the farm.

"This Hoffman family — these are great people, and today is tough for them," said Brian Speltz, a milk quality and market specialist for S&S Dairy Systems. "Just a very emotional day on this farm."

Speltz, who befriended the Hoffmans shortly after he moved to Chatfield about 10 years ago, was one of the many people who showed up to be there for the family.

Many industry acquaintances, neighbors and other farmers were there to help the Hoffmans with the emotional and difficult process. Bridget Hoffman said the rush of support for the farm was, "overwhelming in a good way."

HOFFMAN HISTORY

Brothers John and Corey Hoffman with their father, Gary, manage the 400-acre farm that's been in their family since 1905, when Gary's grandfather started it.

Gary's father and uncle ran the farm until Gary started managing it as a high school freshman. He had planned to attend college and become a veterinarian, but his father got sick and he chose to stay on the farm. He never left.

Gary and his wife, Jo, raised their sons on the farm. John now manages the farm's cropping operation and his wife, Danielle, helps with feeding and the calves aside from her job at Mayo Clinic. They have one son.

Corey, who handles the dairy cows, and his wife, Bridget, have a son and a daughter. Bridget also works at Mayo, along with helping run the calf operation.

COLLAPSE

The barn's roof collapsed under the weight of snow from the weekend's blizzard. The barn was built in 2009, and an addition to its roof (most of which did not collapse) went up in 2015. Fortunately, no one was injured in either collapse.

Gary Hoffman said the first section of roof broke the night of Feb. 23, killing at least 10 cows.

Corey was unable to get to the farm right away because of the snow. John had to go out with a tractor and fetch his brother. Once the two got back to the farm they never left.

It wasn't until the second collapse early Feb. 26 that the situation reached a turning point. Hoffman wasn't sure how many cows were lost in that break, which came right after they'd cut the barn's electricity for safety.

The family's hand was then forced, said Gary Hoffman, with subzero temperatures predicted for the days ahead.

An open barn filled with debris was unsafe for both animals and people.

With the cows out of sorts and manure piling up at their feet, Hoffman said he and his sons were lucky just to get the cows fed one more time.

"It's the only thing we can do right now," said Hoffman of selling the herd. "Maybe it'd be different if the weather was normal."

After the second break, Bridget Hoffman said the family discussed rehoming the cows instead of selling them, but the logistics behind managing hundreds of cows dispersed at different farms would be impossible.

"Lifelong decisions are made in a matter of hours," said Speltz. "And that's what's happened here."

WHAT NOW

Even with the current climate of the dairy industry, Bridget Hoffman said their family had no intention of ever getting out.

"We went from thinking, 'OK, we're alright, we'll get this fixed' to making the decision to sell cows — almost all of which were raised by us," she said.

The Hoffmans could make a comeback in the industry in the future. But even for them, starting with a clean slate will be hard.

"We hope so, but I really don't know," said Bridget Hoffman of the family's plans to continue dairy farming. "We're getting through today, and we have a lot to figure out after that."

The Hoffmans loved their animals, and it showed in the way they treated them on their last day together. The brothers could tell the animals apart by their faces, even though there were hundreds of them, and they talked to them like old friends.

One cow stumbled out-of-turn down the tunnel that led to an outside trailer, gunk dripping from her nose.

"Hold on, snot," said a half-smiling Corey Hoffman.

Without hesitation, the cow turned and went back toward the barn.

Mental health gets its due

Rural stresses receive attention

BY NOAH FISH
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MABEL, Minn. — Minnesota's agricultural industry is taking mental health seriously.

Extension agents and ag professionals are pushing for more outreach programs as well as increased funding for them, but there's still plenty of work that needs to be done, which is why workshops like one Feb. 22 at the Mabel Community Center titled "Dealing with Stress in our Ag Communities" are becoming more common in rural communities.

The workshop covered the sources, signs, symptoms and effects of farm stress. And because mental health awareness has a lot to do with the relationships we have with other people, the morning began with everyone in the room introducing themselves. Present were pastors, bankers and farmers.

Workshop presenters were Meg Moynihan from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and Cynthia Christensen, a registered nurse and counselor who is also the president of the Houston County Farm Bureau.

Christensen said her passion is rural mental health, and reaching out to farmers who might need help. She said in her experience, farmers are not coming forward with their own mental health concerns.

"I've never had a farmer call me and say, 'I need to come to therapy,'" she said. "It's usually by insistence of a relative."

Moynihan also came to the workshop with experience in farming, as well as the stresses that come with it. She and her husband were running their organic dairy farm in Le Sueur County when they lost their milk buyer in 2016. The buyer informed them through a notice that after 30 days, they would no longer be picking up their milk.

She said it caused them to go into a spiral, dumping milk for two months. Her husband found other work as a truck driver, but she stayed and ran the farm by herself. Growing up in Milwaukee, Moynihan said she found out how little she actually knew about farming, and just how

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Show promises to be all things farm

BY RANDI KALLAS
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The 37th annual Agri News Farm Show kicks off a two-day run at 9 a.m. March 12 at the Graham Arena complex on the Olmsted County fairgrounds.

The show is an extravagant exhibition of farm machinery and services useful on every operation in southern Minnesota and northern Iowa.

Machinery, big and small, will be on display, as will the newest in seed and farm chemical developments. Companies that make life a little eas-

ier — such as those with automatic door openers, vacuum systems and financial services — also will be ready to answer questions and show off products.

"We've worked hard to make this event the best it can be," said media sales manager Lisa Schell. "We've lined up a diverse group of exhibitors who will offer products and service along with traditional standbys."

The show is free and runs from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. March 12, and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. March 13.

For Agri News subscribers, the show is a chance to meet the people

who make the weekly newspaper possible.

Former managing editor Mychal Wilmes, who continues to write a weekly column about farm life, will be at the Agri News booth on the show floor from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. both days.

"I love meeting readers and finding out what's on their minds," Wilmes said. "Farming is in my blood and talking to those who share my passion and interests is always time well spent."

Agri News reporter Noah Fish will be at the show, finding stories about people and things important in agri-

culture today.

"I take telling the stories of people and things in the area very seriously, and the Farm Show is a great way to find people I want to know and stories I want to tell," he said.

Longtime features of the show are the lunches served by the Olmsted County Pork Producers, Dairyland Beef Producers and Olmsted County Dairy Association. Pulled pork sandwiches will be available on Tuesday, and beef sandwiches on Wednesday. Malts and ice cream will be available both days.

