

[From the Lakota County Times, Martin, South Dakota]

Town of Whiteclay Begins Revitalization

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Whiteclay, Neb. – Most small towns wouldn't consider demolishing buildings for open fields of sunflowers and closing down major money-making businesses as signs of progress. But most towns aren't like Whiteclay, Nebraska.

For decades the tiny rural community was infamous for its 4 liquor stores that sold millions of cans of beer to residents of the nearby Pine Ridge Indian Reservation – where alcohol is banned.

On any given day you'd have seen cars lined up here outside of Whiteclay's liquor stores, drunken customers wandering the streets, dilapidated buildings, and trash... lots of trash.

But all that changed on May 1 when the state closed down those stores for reasons ranging from inadequate law enforcement in the area to allegations of bootlegging.

Bruce BonFleur is the pastor at Lakota Hope Ministry here in Whiteclay. Driving with him in his truck through town you can see the changes.

"Before...the beer stores, when they were operating, there were a lot of people along here," BonFleur comments, as we move along one of Whiteclay's now deserted back roads. "And you'd see an old mattress. You know, kind of a minicamp. Lots of trash. Look at how clean the road is, Jim. You know...this is not the usual thing. But this is part of the new Whiteclay. It's clean. It's safe. It's quiet. And it's progressing. It's changing. It's changing...literally... before people's eyes."

Whiteclay does look like a different town. Several dilapidated buildings have been torn down and old store fronts repaired. There's a palpable push for renewal. That's especially evident at an open lot near the Northside of town where heavy equipment is moving earth to prepare the site for a new Family Dollar store. In many places a dollar store might not be embraced as a sign of progress. But here it is.

Randy Guiler is spokesman for Dollar Tree - the store's parent company. He explained during a phone interview that demographics and a competitive environment are key factors in planning where to expand.

"When we determine where we're going to open stores we're looking at things like average age, average income, population trend, looking at the competitive environment," Guiler explained. "My sense is the area of Whiteclay is underserved with the consumable product that we sell and we felt that it was a good opportunity to open a store and

support that community.”

And not only are the streets here clean, but the street people are gone. Nadine Morrison is from Pine Ridge but works in Whiteclay at Lakota Hope ministry.

“We no longer have our people sitting here in Whiteclay,” Morrison notes. “A lot them are home not sure what to do with themselves. They’re cleaning their yards, they’re...you know, some of them are still drinking. But they don’t have that access to them every single day.”

Morrison says one street person died while another has actually cleaned himself up and applied for a small business loan from the Lakota Funds Community Development organization. As for those who bought beer here for partying, they’re either going to their local bootlegger or driving to places like Chadron or Gordon, Nebraska.

But not everyone in Whiteclay agrees about the pace of progress. Lance Moss has owned Whiteclay Grocery for 20 years and thinks this new image of the town that’s being touted is a bit overblown...though he does like what he sees so far.

“Do I miss all the things that went on before...all the people hanging out and whatever?” Moss replies in response to my comment about the recent changes in Whiteclay. “I don’t miss that at all. But I do not agree that them liquor stores should be shut down. You know, the town got a bit of a facelift. But anybody that’s telling you there’s these dramatic changes or these big thing...I mean, I don’t know where they’re coming from on that deal. Yeah, that’s farfetched.”

Though farfetched may be in the eye of the beholder. For Catherine Blue Bird feeling safe in Whiteclay is pretty dramatic The young Lakota artist lives in Wounded Knee, on the bordering Pine Ridge Reservation. She says it’s only since Whiteclay has been cleaned up that she feels comfortable enough to visit the area and try to sell some of her art work to visitors.

“A lot has changed in the past few months since the liquor stores closed and I’m grateful for that,” Blue Bird observes. “Because we’ve been losing a lot of loved ones from this alcohol that was here. And I see now that there was some people that sobered up because Whiteclay closed...and I’m thankful for that. Usually I wouldn’t be able to come here and sell my work while there were people here just asking for change or whatever. But now it’s a safer place for me and I can get sales for my crafts and arts now.”

With the streets cleared of stumbling drinkers, a new national retail store set to open and local Native American artists willing to visit Whiteclay the town is certainly moving in a different direction. Just how long that will continue could be determined soon. That’s because the store owners go to court later this month to try to get back their liquor licenses.

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