Postville making progress 5 years after immigration raid
Five years after the raid at Agriprocessors, the town of Postville is bouncing back.

EDITORIAL

Postville making progress 5 years after immigration raid

Five years ago, the town of Postville was left in shambles after a raid that led to the arrest of nearly 400 immigrant workers.

The kosher meatpacking plant, known as Agriprocessors, was the economic anchor for the small town. Many plant officials faced a variety of immigration, bank fraud, wire fraud and mail fraud charges, as well as child labor law violations. Some, including vice president Sholom Rubashkin, were sent to prison.

It basically took one day to cripple the economy of the town.

Nationally, the raid prompted many cries of government bullying on one side, and declarations of support for the raid on the other. Those in the substantial middle continued to wonder if our leaders would ever take the necessary steps toward overhauling our immigration policies.

As always, the national discussion eventually cooled to a simmer. Northeast Iowa, however, was left with a small town with a crushed economy.

Morale, of course, followed the economy. Homes and other buildings were abandoned. A year after the raid, the lines at a food pantry were the longest in town.

A third of the population had left. There was no funding forthcoming, unlike situations in which communities suffer through natural disasters, or other unforeseen economic difficulties.

Five years later, Postville and its residents are still in an uphill battle.

Fortunately, there are people willing to fight that tough battle, and someday that collective effort could be one of the town’s most important and lasting legacies.

Agri Star Meat & Poultry, based in Brooklyn, N.Y., stepped in to operate the plant. It’s a leaner process, and employs less people, but still serves as an economic and employment focus.

Postville remains a melting pot with people from different backgrounds coming to work at the meatpacking plant, including an influx of refugees from Somalia.

That has sparked some new business. A new kosher food store, Glatt Market, has opened downtown, replacing a store that closed shortly after Agriprocessors’ bankruptcy.

There’s a new Somalian food store and an African clothing store.

Dollar General opened two years ago. “It does a fairly large business, and we saw that with the local option sales tax increase that we noticed after they arrived,” said Darcy Radloff, city clerk.

The chamber of commerce is actively recruiting members, hoping to spur any business growth.

Future progression is still undefined, but every little victory gets them another foothold in that uphill battle.

“We never looked back after the raid,” Postville Mayor Leigh Rekowska said. “We just went ahead as a town and kept on going. We never felt sorry for ourselves. We knew we were always going to be here, and we kept going.”

Coming back from disaster is a dynamic and time-consuming process; but there is no question that sort of attitude is only going to help.