

# In the Land of Self-Defeat In the Land of Self-Defeat

What a fight over the local library in my hometown in rural Arkansas taught me about my neighbors' go-it-alone mythology — and Donald Trump's unbeatable appeal.

A view of Van Buren County, Ark. Rural counties like Van Buren voted for Donald Trump in 2016 by big margins; Mr. Trump won 72 percent of the vote here.Credit...Audra Melton for The New York Times

By Monica Potts

Ms. Potts is working on a book about low-income women in Arkansas.

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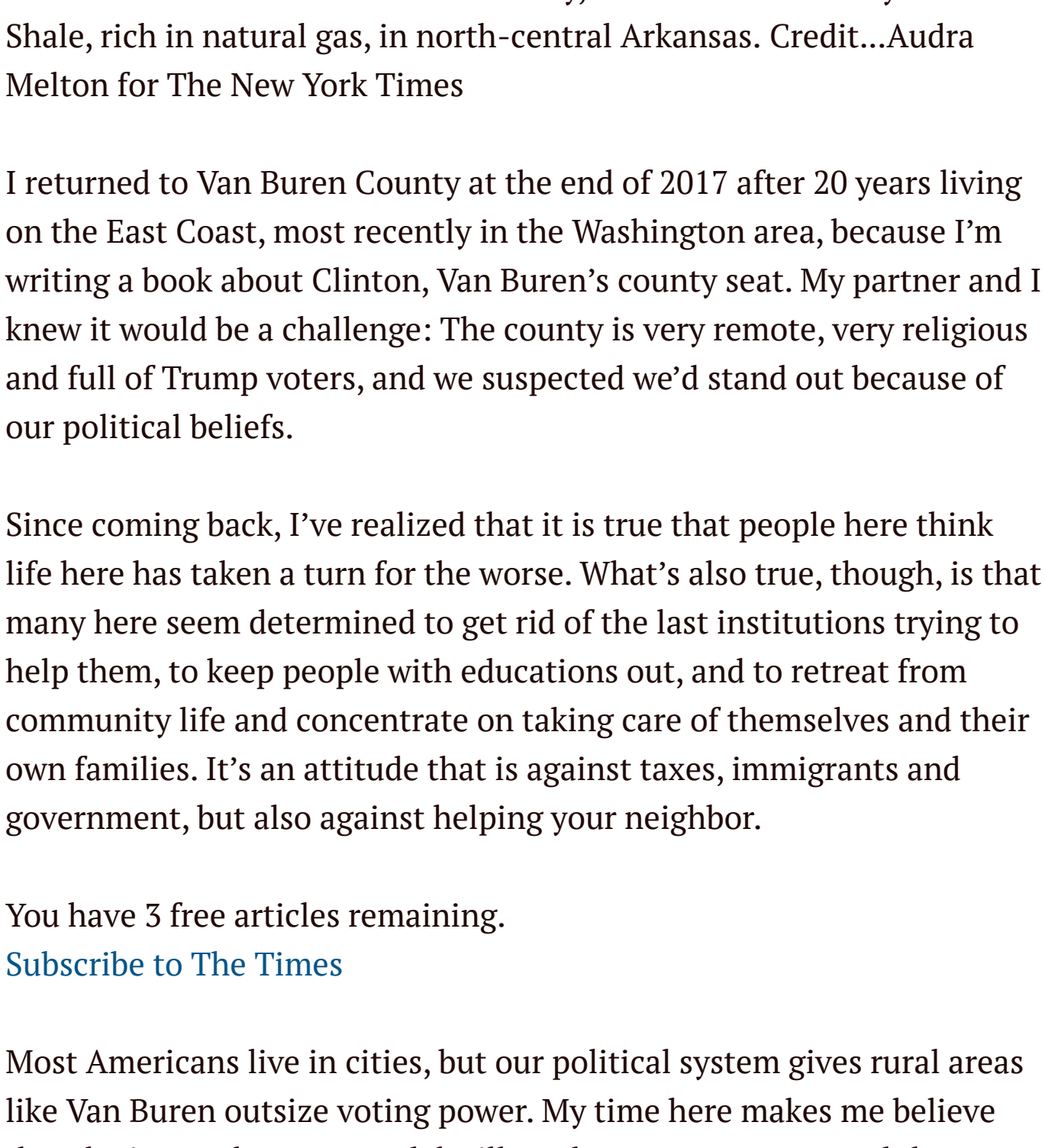
CLINTON, Ark. — Inside Washington, there's a sense that this scandal really is different. Even the White House's memorandum of the phone conversation President Trump had with the Ukrainian president in July makes it clear that Mr. Trump asked a foreign country to help him undermine a political rival. But while national polls show support for impeaching him is growing, it's still divided sharply along partisan lines. Democrats strongly favor it, while Republicans tend to oppose it.

I've been following this story from my little corner of the world in rural Van Buren County, Ark. Tim Widener, 50, who lives outside my hometown, Clinton, summed up the town's attitude well: "It's really a sad waste of taxpayers' money," he told me.

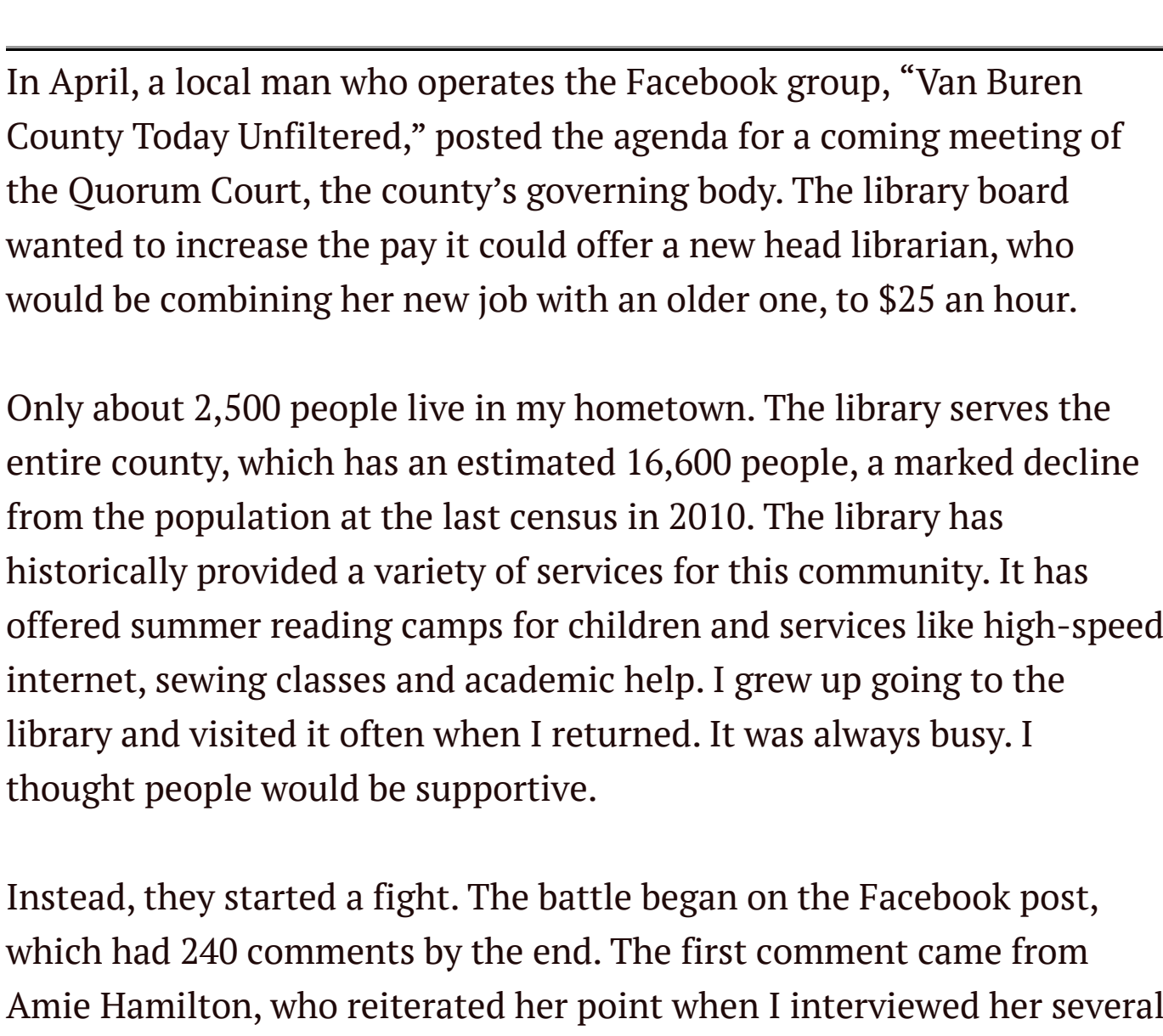
Mr. Widener could have been talking about anything. His comment reflected a worldview that is becoming ever more deeply ingrained in the white people who remain in rural America — Washington politicians are spending money that they shouldn't be. In 2016, shortly after Mr. Trump's victory,Katherine J. Cramer, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, summed up the attitudes she observed after years of studying rural Americans: "The way these folks described the world to me, their basic concern was that people like them, in places like theirs, were overlooked and disrespected," she wrote in Vox, explaining that her subjects considered "racial minorities on welfare" as well as "lazy urban professionals" working desk jobs to be undeserving of state and federal dollars. People like my neighbors hate that the government is spending money on those who don't look like them and don't live like them — but what I've learned since I came home is that they remain opposed even when they themselves stand to benefit.

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Image



At a music festival in Van Buren County, which sits on the Fayetteville Shale, rich in natural gas, in north-central Arkansas. Credit...Audra Melton for The New York Times

I returned to Van Buren County at the end of 2017 after 20 years living on the East Coast, most recently in the Washington area, because I'm writing a book about Clinton, Van Buren's county seat. My partner and I knew it would be a challenge: The county is very remote, very religious and full of Trump voters, and we suspected we'd stand out because of our political beliefs.

Since coming back, I've realized that it is true that people here think life has taken a turn for the worse. What's also true, though, is that many here seem determined to get rid of the last institutions trying to help them, to keep people with educations out, and to retreat from community life and concentrate on taking care of themselves and their own families. It's an attitude that is against taxes, immigrants and government, but also against helping your neighbor.

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Most Americans live in cities, but our political system gives rural areas like Van Buren outsize voting power. My time here makes me believe that the impeachment scandal will not hurt Mr. Trump — and that Democrats who promise to make the lives of people like my neighbors better might actually help him.

I realized this after a fight over, of all things, our local library.

In April, a local man who operates the Facebook group, "Van Buren County Today Unfiltered," posted the agenda for a coming meeting of the Quorum Court, the county's governing body. The library board wanted to increase the pay it could offer a new head librarian, who would be combining her new job with an older one, to \$25 an hour.

Only about 2,500 people live in my hometown. The library serves the entire county, which has an estimated 16,600 people, a marked decline from the population at the last census in 2010. The library has historically provided a variety of services for this community. It has offered summer reading camps for children and services like high-speed internet, sewing classes and academic help. I grew up going to the library and visited it often when I returned. It was always busy. I thought people would be supportive.

Instead, they started a fight. The battle began on the Facebook post, which had 240 comments by the end. The first comment came from Amie Hamilton, who reiterated her point when I interviewed her several months later. "If you want to make \$25 an hour, please go to a city that can afford it," she wrote. "We the people are not here to pay your excessive salaries through taxation or in any other way."

There was general agreement among the Facebook commenters that no one in the area was paid that much — the librarian's wages would have worked out to be about \$42,200 a year — and the people who do actually earn incomes that are similar — teachers and many county officials — largely remained quiet. (Clinton has a median income of \$34,764 and a poverty rate of 22.6 percent.) When a few of us, including me, pointed out that the candidate for the library job had a master's degree, more people commented on the uselessness of education. "Call me narrow-minded but I've never understood why a librarian needs a four-year degree," someone wrote. "We were taught Dewey decimal system in grade school. Never sounded like anything too tough."

I watched the fight unfold with a sense of sadness, anger and frustration. I started arguing. It didn't work. The pay request was pulled from the Quorum Court's agenda.

I didn't realize it at first, but the fight over the library was rolled up into a bigger one about the library building, and an even bigger fight than that, about the county government, what it should pay for, and how and whether people should be taxed at all. The library fight was, itself, a fight over the future of rural America, what it means to choose to live in a county like mine, what my neighbors were willing to do for one another, what they were willing to sacrifice to foster a sense of community here.

The answer was, for the most part, not very much.

A 2016 analysis by National Public Radio found that as counties become more rural, they tend to become more Republican. Completely rural counties went for Mr. Trump by 70.6 percent over all, which makes my county politically average — Van Buren gave Mr. Trump 73 percent of its vote. Rural America is not a monolith, but a majority of rural counties fit perfectly into Mr. Trump's preferred demographics: They are largely white (96.2 percent in Van Buren), and rates of educational attainment are low.

People are leaving rural areas for cities because that's where the jobs are. According to one analysis, between 2008, during the Great Recession, and 2017, the latest year for which data is available, 99 percent of the job and population growth occurred in counties with at least one city of 50,000 people or more or in counties directly adjacent to such cities. It's hard to generalize what's happening to rural counties, but many are faced with a shrinking property tax base and a drop in economic activity, which also decreases sales tax revenues.

Many rural counties are also experiencing declines in whatever industries were once the major employers. In Appalachia, this is coal; in much of the Midwest, it is heavy manufacturing; and in my county, and many other counties, it's natural gas and other extractive industries.

This part of Arkansas sits on the Fayetteville Shale, which brought in natural gas exploration in the early 2000s. For about a decade, the gas companies paid local taxes on their property, equipment and the money they made from extracting natural gas, and landowners paid property taxes on the royalties they earned. It was a boom. Many people at the time, here and elsewhere, expected that the money would last longer than it did.

Instead, the price of natural gas plummeted in 2009 and profits declined. Production slowed. One of the biggest natural gas companies in the area, Houston-based Southwestern Energy, stopped paying taxes to the counties here, arguing that the rates were unfair. The company and five Arkansas counties, including mine, are still locked in litigation over some of the money it owes (it recently paid a portion of it).

Van Buren's County's chief executive, Dale James, told me that county revenues had declined by at least 20 percent from when gas production was at its height in 2008. The county budget is now just over \$11 million, including revenue from local taxes and state and federal grants.

When local economies are flagging, state governments don't step in to help as much as they once did. The Pew Charitable Trust found that state aid to local governments fell by 5.3 percent during the recession's lowest point, in fiscal year 2013, and it still is below what it was before the recession. On top of that, 45 states restrict the way local governments can collect property taxes on their citizens in some way: In Arkansas, property and sales tax increases, the main source of revenue for many local governments, have to be approved by voters.

It means many county governments are getting less money on several fronts. A report from the National Association of Counties from 2016 was titled, "Doing More With Less." It's the new normal.

Local budgets pay for the infrastructure and institutions people deal with every day — schools, roads, water, trash collection, libraries and animal shelters. Cuts to those services are felt in a visceral way.

The fight over the pay for the new head librarian had a larger context: The library moved into a new building, with new services, in 2016. Construction began during the natural gas boom years, and ended after the bust, just as the county budget was being squeezed and services were being cut.

During the boom, the new building had seemed necessary, but with the revenue decreases, the county knew it was going to have a hard time paying the \$2.1 million still owed on it. (Disclosure: My mother was on the library board when some of the decisions about the new building were made.)

The library made its own budget cuts, but the savings weren't enough to cover the shortfall in paying for the building, and there was a real danger of the library closing, leaving its new, hulking brick building empty. The people who didn't frequent the library argued that the community didn't really need it anymore, anyway. After all, if you have internet, you can get whatever you want in a day.

Such was the situation when the pay raise showed up on the Quorum Court agenda. Why give one person a raise when the county was slashing its budget, when we were going without so much else? The head librarian candidate, Andrea Singleton, eventually took the job at the old salary, just over \$19 an hour, although at first the fight made her upset enough to consider leaving.

"It was enough to make me want to run away," Ms. Singleton, who had been on the library's staff for four years when she was offered the promotion, told me. "But I got over it."

When I spoke to other county residents, many thought all of the budget cuts were a sad but necessary correction to the county's previously profligate ways.

Ms. Hamilton, the Facebook commenter, told me that the voters fixed the county's problems by electing Republicans to countywide offices in 2018, including Mr. James, who replaced a Democrat who'd held the office for four terms. "Some people are more fiscally responsible than others," she said.

Ms. Hamilton, who is 52, had moved to the county during the natural gas boom, in 2008, and continued working with that industry even after it left. She commutes each week to work in the Midland-Odessa area of Texas. She noted that Clinton is a small town and simply couldn't afford the luxury of government services. "If you're looking for a handout, this is not the place; we can't support that," Ms. Hamilton said.

Mr. Widener, 50, has lived in the county on and off for 18 years, and was born in the nearby town of Conway, home to the University of Central Arkansas. He commutes there for work in the university's information technology department. He told me the idea of paying the librarian \$25 an hour was "typical government waste." He added, "It's the same thing in Washington."

The typical private-sector wage in Van Buren, \$10 to \$13 an hour, was right for the county, many people said. Anything more than that was wasteful, or evidence of government corruption.

Image

An effort to increase Andrea Singleton's pay to \$25 an hour raised hackles in Van Buren County.Credit...Audra Melton for The New York Times

Image

Tim Widener argued that a wage of \$25 an hour for a librarian was "typical government waste." Credit...Audra Melton for The New York Times

Almost everyone I spoke with feels that the county overspent during the gas boom years, and that the bill is coming due. "We got wasteful and stupid, and now we have to go back to common sense," Corrine Weatherly, who owns a dress- and costume-making shop, Sew What, told me. Ms. Weatherly also runs the county fair, and so she shows up to almost every Quorum Court meeting.

This worldview will continue to affect national elections. The most dominant news source here is Fox News, which I think helps perpetuate these attitudes. There's another element, too: For decades, the dominant conservative theory of politics is that government should be run like a business, lean and efficient, and one of the biggest private employers here is Walmart, where Mr. James was working when he was elected.

There's a prevailing sense of scarcity — it's easy for people who have lived much of their lives in a place where \$25 an hour seems like a high salary to believe there just isn't enough money to go around. The government, here and elsewhere, just can't afford to help anyone, people told me. The attitude extends to national issues, like immigration. Ms. Hamilton told me she'd witnessed, in Texas, a hospital being practically bankrupted by the cost of caring for immigrants and said, "I don't want my tax dollars to be used to pay for people that are coming here just to sit on a government ticket." Mr. Widener, who described himself as "more libertarian" than anything else, told me his heart goes out to migrant children who are held in detention centers at the border, but he blames the parents who brought them to this country.

Where I see needless cruelty, my neighbors see necessary reality.

The people left in rural areas are more and more conservative, and convinced that the only way to get things done is to do them yourself. Especially as services have disappeared, they are more resentful about having to pay taxes, even ones that might restore those services.

And many of those who want to live in a place with better schools, better roads and bigger public libraries have taken Ms. Hamilton's suggestion — they've moved to places that can afford to offer them. This includes many of my peers from high school who left for college or jobs and permanently settled in bigger, wealthier cities and towns around the region.

Over the summer, after the uproar about Ms. Singleton's pay, library supporters gathered signatures for a special election that would have slightly increased the amount of county property taxes collected for the library, helping it pay off the new building and stave off closing altogether. It set off a new furor, even though the increase was estimated to cost about \$20 a year for properties assessed at \$100,000, and many people have properties valued at much less than that.

Phillip Ellis, who was chosen to be chairman of the library board right before the controversies began, thought the outrage about the potential tax increase was more about philosophy than actual numbers. "I think it's just anti-tax anything," he said.

He recounted some of the complaints people in the county had made to him about the proposed increase. "They'd say, 'So-and-so has a big farm and they may not even use the library,'" he recalled. He would tell them, "Well, I don't have children and never use the school." With that sort of mentality, he said, "no one will do anything."

That was the crux of the issue — people didn't want to pay for something they didn't think they would use. I suspect that many residents are willing to pay for some institutions they see as necessary, like the sheriff's department, but libraries, symbols of public education and public self-improvement, are more easily sacrificed.

The library tax vote was quickly scrapped: Instead, Mr. James has suggested extending a 1 percent sales tax that went into place in 2001 to help pay for a new hospital building. Residents are due to vote on the idea in March.

Many other counties have turned to sales taxes as property taxes dwindle: It means that people who stop to shop when they're passing through pay it as well, but it's also a tax that tends to fall harder on lower-income households. It is also likely to be more expensive for some residents than a property tax increase would have been, but it will be paid in small amounts over time at the grocery store and Walmart, and voters are less likely to notice it.

If the tax extension passes, it's estimated to pay off the library debt in about a year. But it delays a reckoning on whether and how the people who live here should contribute to the well-being of the county's infrastructure and services.

A considerable part of rural America is shrinking, and, for some, this means it's time to go into retreat. Rather than pitching in to maintain what they have, people are willing to go it alone, to devote all their resources to their own homes and their own families.

It makes me wonder if appeals from Democratic candidates still hoping to win Trump voters over by offering them more federal services will work. Many of the Democratic front-runners have released plans that call for more federal tax investment in rural infrastructure. Mr. Widener told me he had watched some of the Democratic debates, and his reaction was that everything the candidates proposed was "going to cost me money."

Economic appeals are not going to sway any Trump voters, who view anyone who is trying to increase government spending, especially to help other people, with disdain, even if it ultimately helps them, too. And Trump voters are carrying the day here in Van Buren County. They see Mr. Trump's slashing of the national safety net and withdrawal from the international stage as necessities — these things reflect their own impulse writ large.

They believe every tax dollar spent now is wasteful and foolish and they will have to pay for it later. It is as if there will be a nationwide scramble to cover the shortfall just as there was here with the library. As long as Democrats make promises to make their lives better with free college and Medicare for all sound like they include government spending, these voters will turn to Trump again — and it won't matter how many scandals he's been tarnished by.

Monica Potts is working on a book about the low-income women of her hometown.

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