

Nekoma, ND (AP) - Mayor Bill Verwey was dressing for a dinner at the Officers' Club when he heard on the six o'clock news that his brand-new city was about to become a ghost town.

And so it has. From the grain elevator at one end of the street to the cemetery at the other, Mayor Verwey's saloon is the only place of business still open.

All the others are boarded up: The filling station, the cafe, the grocery store, the real estate office, all of them.

The new school, finished last winter, is nailed shut, too.

Beyond the cemetery, on the edge of town, a development of 200 homes, barely used, all empty, line winding streets freshly paved. Grass grows through cracks in the paving. Eerie.

Mayor Verwey, barkeep, is Nekoma's entire work force.

His occasional customers are the farmers who truck their grain from miles across the prairie to the elevator and the remaining Nekoma residents, about 85 of them, all retired folks who have nowhere to go. Business is not booming.

Five years ago, Bill Verwey had four bartenders, a cook and a crowd around the pool table. Now he has a hand-lettered sign on the wall: "Things are so tough even the people who don't intend to pay aren't buying."

"We try to keep a sense of humor," the mayor said over a cold beer. "No sense in crying."

But there is. What happened to Nekoma is a crying shame.

Ten years ago, the Pentagon decided to build a missile site out here in the wide open spaces of the Great Plains.

The construction force would be 3,000 workers. The permanent party - Mayor Verwey smiles at the irony of that military term - would be 1,000. The cost would be \$5.5 billion. The place would be Nekoma. Jackpot.

The little prairie town jumped to life. Trucks rumbled, hammers pounded, cash registers rang, town pride swelled. High school graduates put up a sign on Main Street that became a town slogan: "We promised to go somewhere. We promised to do something."

In five years the job was done. The missile site rose in the shape of a pyramid, visible for miles across the prairie.

Nearby stood the nation's newest military base: New barracks, new gym, new swimming pool, new everything. The town glistened, too: new fire engine, new water system, new pavement.

On October 1, 1975, the Safeguard missile complex at Nekoma was declared fully operational.

One week later it was declared obsolete.

"Well, you can imagine we were stunned," Mayor Verwey said. "We couldn't believe it. We believed it soon enough, though, when they padlocked the place and moved out. Prosperity ends a whole lot quicker than it begins."

"You could say we are no worse off than before, that we are about the same population. That's true. But before, Nekoma was a town. Our school dated back to 1920. Nekoma was a real place.

"What happened happened so fast it was like having a rug pulled out from under us. No more town."

"We do have a mighty fine water system," the mayor said, wryly. "We charge everybody the same fee: \$8.25 a month. That's because we don't have anybody to read the meters."