

There's No Place Like Home: Rebuilding Greensburg

by Sean W. Reid, C.B.O.



Remains of the Greensburg Big Well Water Tower following a category EF-5 tornado that effectively destroyed the town on May 4, 2007. (Photo by Sean W. Reid.)

For most of the last 125 years, Greensburg, Kansas, was an archetypical small-town Midwestern community. Built around the railroad and farming, the seat of Kiowa County grew from the home of a few hundred to a small city of more than 1,200 residents. Long considered a wonderful place to raise a family—where kids were always safe and doors never locked—Greensburg's claim to fame was that it was the home of the world's largest hand-dug water well and the final resting place of the largest Pallasite meteor ever found. Quiet, peaceful and closely knit, Greensburg was the perfect picture of a relaxed, southwestern Kansas farm town.

That all changed Friday, May 4, 2007, at approximately 8:30 p.m when a category EF-5 tornado nearly two miles wide raced north from the Kansas-Oklahoma border straight toward Greensburg. Most residents were home watching television when the weather service broadcast the warning to take cover. Well familiar with the threat posed by tornados, everyone headed down to their storm shelters when suddenly—

screaming like a sky full of banshees—one of the largest tornadoes ever recorded in U.S. history blasted through the city, virtually wiping Greensburg off the face of the Earth.

Approximately twelve minutes later an eerie stillness settled over the town. At that silent signal, the locals began to emerge from their basements to find their snug homes and tidy businesses gone: almost nothing was left standing beneath the moody clouds crowding the evening sky. As first responders quickly moved to rescue survivors trapped in the wreckage, most residents gathered family together and sought refuge in neighboring communities.

When Saturday morning dawned, the full extent of the disaster became painfully clear. Block after block of homes had vanished. The schools, churches and downtown businesses had disappeared. The hospital and fire station were little more than piles of twisted metal, splintered wood and rubble. The Farmers Co-op and Kiowa County Courthouse suffered severe damage. The regional John Deere dealership, repository of more than 150 pieces of heavy agricultural equipment before the tornado hit, was completely destroyed. Street signs, telephone poles, electrical transmission lines, gas service piping and sewage systems were damaged, unusable or obliterated.

Nearly forty volunteers from the Code Council's Heart of America Chapter, led by President Tina Rakes and 2007 ICC Code Official of the Year Jerry Mallory, were immediately dispatched as part of the Kansas Disaster Assessment Team. But with 95 percent of the structures in Greensburg flattened, there was little for them to do. As Mallory bluntly relates, "We finished our job by noon Sunday—the assessment process went pretty quickly because there was almost nothing left to evaluate."

As stunned residents returned to their once-bucolic community in the days following the traumatic event, their first questions were not when or how the recovery process would begin but whether the town would ever be rebuilt. Like many small farming communities across the Midwest, the population had quietly dwindled over the past forty years as young people went away to college and later settled in bigger cities, and many structures were underinsured in terms of current reconstruction costs. With almost no functional infrastructure, schools, businesses or homes remaining, some wondered if Greensburg would simply fade into history.

But Kansans are a resilient breed, and the citizens of Greensburg were a particularly determined force. The Heart of America Chapter partnered with ICC and returned to Greensburg to establish the city's first Building Inspection Department, and ICC Board member Tim Ryan facilitated the Code Council's donation of an I-Codes library. Ryan, Mallory and ICC Regional Manager Billy Pope also played critical roles in the development of basic administrative



Greensburg Regional Hospital. (Photo by Jerry Mallory.)



Van deposited in Greensburg motel. (Photo by Jerry Mallory.)



The remains of a residential neighborhood. (Photo by Sean W. Reid.)



Greensburg City Hall. (Photo by Jerry Mallory.)

The Heart of America Chapter

The Heart of America Chapter (HOA) of ICC represents building code professionals across the State of Kansas. Founded in 1967, HOA serves the citizens of Kansas through education, support for the promulgation of the ICC family of codes and involvement in the Kansas Disaster Assessment Team, and was honored in 2006 and 2007 as a Code Council Chapter of Merit.

HOA is active both in ICC Heartland Coalition Region IV and with Region X in the development of a mutual aid structure for regional disaster assessment. Utilizing lessons learned in Greensburg, the chapter is currently providing volunteer staffing services for the City of Chapman, Kansas, Building Inspection Department as the city recovers from the devastation of a June 11 tornado event. ♦

functions for the fledgling inspection office. Computers, building inspection management software and contractor registration software were obtained for the new office, and with the most up-to-date codes, equipment and management tools now at their disposal, rounds of volunteer Heart of America Chapter members provided inspection and plan review until the city was able to hire permanent staff.

An interesting byproduct of the disaster—to some degree a result of the intense attention the city received in the print and broadcast media—was that

volunteers from across Kansas and every corner of the U.S. flocked to Greensburg during the initial clean-up, resettlement and reconstruction phases. Federal and state agencies, private enterprises, nonprofit associations, and individuals flooded the city with help in the form of labor and donations, and with the influx of assistance came new ideas.

City officials, community leaders and residents held a series of town meetings and workshops to gauge their collective needs, concerns and interests. During the meetings some residents and business owners expressed their desire for reconstruction to be accomplished as expeditiously as possible, while others began to formulate a different vision. Gradually, after receiving input from all stakeholders, it became clear that Greensburg's citizens were determined not just to build a new city, but a new kind of city.

The realization was that reconstruction presented a unique opportunity to recreate Greensburg as a planned, green community utilizing the latest energy-efficient materials and technology and promoting the use of renewable or recycled products while providing a home for sustainable manufacturing and eco-industrial businesses. This bold idea was conceived during the town meetings, nurtured through the development of strategic partnerships, then implemented by the sweat of the Kansans and numerous volunteers.

The key to the new vision is the *Greensburg Sustainable Comprehensive Plan*. Created through a collaborative effort led by Berkebile Nelson Immenschuh McDowell Architects of Kansas City, various public and nonprofit agencies, city officials and staff, and citizens, the plan provides an innovative blueprint for the future of Greensburg. Integrating renewable energy sources, energy-efficient infrastructure, a reduced carbon footprint, eco-industrial businesses, LEED Platinum standard public buildings, efficient dwellings and commercial structures, and a networked system of trails linking parks and green corridors with restored prairie and wetland zones, the *Greensburg Sustainable Comprehensive Plan* is recognized as a world-class model for truly sustainable community development.



One of sixteen green self-help housing starts in Greensburg. (Photo by J. Michael Gurnee.)



The 547 Community Art Center, designed through the University of Kansas School of Architecture and Urban Planning 804 Studio program, is the first LEED Platinum Certified structure in the state.



One of two sixteen-unit green townhomes projects.



The Greensburg State Bank rebuilds with insulated concrete form construction.



The Bucklin Tractor & Implement John Deere Dealership represents the partnerships developing between Greensburg businesses and corporate America, and has become a model for future green John Deere dealerships.



A sure sign of a city coming back, speculative housing returns to Greensburg for the first time in forty-five years.



Greensburg's next generation enjoys park facilities donated by CBS Television.

(All photos on this page by J. Michael Gurnee.)

Partnerships between local businesses and their corporate parents, such as General Motors and the John Deere Company, have resulted in the construction of green dealerships destined to be models for the future, and the recently completed Greensburg 547 Community Art Center, designed and executed by the University of Kansas School of Architecture's Studio 804, is the first LEED Platinum certified building in the state. In addition, the City Council has passed a resolution to construct all new municipal buildings to the LEED Platinum standard, and city officials and the private sector are exploring a variety of exciting projects including the development of a green industrial park and an alternative energy program for Greensburg.

Building Inspection Department Office Administrator Christy Pyatt reports that 46 permanent commercial structure permits and 154 new home permits have been issued to date, and supporting the rapid rate of construction has been a welcome challenge for department staff, who consider themselves educators rather than regulators. When asked how he feels about all the green building going on in the city, Planning and Zoning Administrator Michael

Gurnee says, "Greensburg was dying, a typical western Kansas town. Being green is Greensburg's hook."

Now, like Kansas's fabled Emerald City, the new Greensburg is rising green above the plains. ♦

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