

When we decide to make them, Sustainable Communities will come in all sizes, forms, and locations

by W. Cecil Steward and Sharon B. Kuska

Greensburg, Kansas, by the forces of nature, has been given the opportunity to be a ghost town, or to be a newer-old town, or to reinvent itself as a dynamic, sustainable community on the high plains of North America.

On the evening of May 4, 2007, an F-5 tornado destroyed almost 95% of all the structures in Greensburg. Miraculously, the loss of life in the community was only twelve persons. Today, seventeen months after the storm, even though an estimated 81,000 truck loads of debris, including recycled metals and concrete, have been hauled out of the community, much evidence of the destruction, loss, and temporary recovery efforts dots the landscape of the former “typical” Midwestern rural town.

Before this fateful night in May, Greensburg’s claim to fame was the “world’s largest hand-dug water well”, “The Big Well”, a water well hand-dug in 1887-88, by farmers, ranchers, and local townsfolk to a depth of 109 feet deep, and 32 feet across for the supply of water to the community and to the newly anticipated railroad traffic through the community. Perhaps some of the community’s conservation genetics were born with this project through the use of the soil and rock from the dig to level and smooth the surface of the town streets.

With 95% of the homes and businesses blown away and only approximately 1400 people remaining from a long period of population attrition, who would have been surprised if the well had been closed, and the town turned back into prairie? Nor would it have been surprising to have the approximately 700 people who did not want to be “from” Greensburg, say, “I want to stay, but, I want my community back as it was, as quickly as possible.” After all, the “rebuild it as it was” is the normal psychology of disaster recovery in the U.S., witness New Orleans after Katrina, Florida after Andrew, Grand Island after the ---- tornado, etc. Even many of the policies of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have become codified around “replacement planning”, not opportunities planning.

Sometimes, as the saying goes, “The planets are accidentally aligned.” --- and the best of the possibilities and opportunities begin to take shape.

Some people in the community were already thinking about green and sustainable solutions to community issues. Matt Deighton (now the Coordinator for Volunteers) had just days before the tornado suggested that the Mayor should hand out free compact fluorescent light bulbs at Earth Day, instead of the traditional green plastic bags. Others were beginning to think about conservation and non-polluting steps for the community. Immediately after the tornado the governor of Kansas, Kathleen Sebelius, recommended individuals and an architectural firm renowned for their knowledge and practice of green planning and design (BNIM of Kansas City) to assist Greensburg in its recovery

planning. The city administrator, Steve Hewitt, was not thinking clean-up and demolition, but clean-up and reconstruction of the city's infrastructure. The Greensburg Schools superintendent, -----, was not thinking of closing the destroyed school, but of reopening school in the fall of 2008 with no lost educational opportunities. Tom Corns, president and owner of an 85 year, family institution, the Greensburg State Bank, was not thinking of walking away from his customers, he was thinking of opening on Monday morning, of keeping his trust with the community after the tornado on Friday night. (Which he accomplished by placing a teller at a card table, on the sidewalk in front of the destroyed bank building, with \$150,000 in cash for check cashing for anyone in the community.)

“The challenge” says Matt Deighton, “was to build homes, not houses”, because these people were committed to rebuilding community.

But, a lot of learning had to take place six weeks of public scavenging, trying to separate your salvageable things from your neighbors' things; transition survival, where to find – how to find daily needs; learning how to accept kindness, how to be a receiver, rather than a giver; learning and re-learning the beliefs and values of your neighbors; respecting their needs and emotions; listening to leaders and professionals about the choices and the opportunities; being a participant in the largest decisions of your life, thinking about community in new ways and terms*sustainability?*

5 Ways We Put the "Green" in Greensburg



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- Greensburg is home to the most LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) buildings per capita in the U.S.
- We are the first city in the U.S. to use all LED streetlights.



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- Greensburg is 100% renewable, 100% of the time. All of the electricity used in the City of Greensburg is wind energy.
- Water is a very precious resource and we conserve every drop with low flow fixtures and native plantings in our landscaping. We also collect rainwater for use in irrigation and in some facilities, as grey water in toilets.



- - Greensburg has single stream curbside recycling with [Nisly Brothers](#).
- And more!