

FYI / Living

A tornado-wracked Kansas town leaps into the future as it rebuilds under the camera's eye

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GREENSBURG, Kan. | I knew that this town, 100 miles west of Wichita on U.S. 54, was picked clean last May by an F5 tornado that killed 10 people.

With more than 90 percent of buildings damaged beyond repair — the high school ripped open, remains of structures found 50 miles away — Greensburg was literally wiped off the map, its Google satellite images replaced with error messages.



How an eco-friendly downtown Greensburg might look, according to the plan submitted by BNIM Architects.

I'd also heard that some or most of the 1,700 inhabitants of greater Greensburg wanted to rebuild their town in an eco-friendly manner. The "greening of Greensburg," endorsed by Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and city leaders, calls for transforming a denuded, windswept ag town into a shiny, fuel-sipping showplace of 21st-century design.

I came here because a leading cable channel was documenting the process. And because I know the difference between reality TV and reality, I had to wonder whether all the green-talk would really lead to green-action.

So far, it's still mostly talk. Hundreds of people are still living in FEMA trailers, and hundreds more have left town. But many who remain have begun to dream big, with the help of outsiders who believe Greensburg can become the country's first enviro-mecca. It's all happening under the gaze of television cameras, and these days when TV crews show up to film your renovation, good things have a way of happening.

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A front-page *USA Today* story written six days after the tornado was typical of news stories written in the aftermath. Faced with devastation, a farm community with an aging population and shrinking tax base was more likely to scatter than rebuild.

Deep in the article, however, there lay a tantalizing quote from the city's energetic, 35-year-old administrator, Steve Hewitt. In rebuilding Greensburg, Hewitt told the newspaper that "he'd like to make it a leader in environmentally sensitive design."

Around town he was telling anyone who would listen: Yes, Mother Nature had delivered us a terrible blow, but she had also handed us a golden opportunity. After the 10 million cubic feet of debris was hauled off or burned, Greensburg was a clean slate.

In suburban Washington, D.C., Eileen O'Neill took note. One month earlier, the veteran cable executive had taken the reins of Discovery Home Channel, a network on digital cable.

Discovery Home was being relaunched as Planet Green, "a global cross-platform green lifestyle initiative," in the company's PR-lance.

Within days of the disaster, O'Neill was in Greensburg to huddle with Hewitt and figure out if Planet Green and the farm-town phoenix could plan their ascents together.

"When we first partnered with the town, we were there because they declared they wanted to go green," O'Neill told me. "They saw the value on having ongoing media attention through our involvement."

At the July press tour for TV critics held in Los Angeles, David Zaslav, the CEO of Discovery Communications, announced "Eco-Town Greensburg," a 13-part reality series that would document the town's efforts to build green. And he immediately supersized the news by revealing that actor and environmental activist Leonardo DiCaprio would be attached as executive producer of the series.

"We're not just about entertainment," Zaslav declared. "We are going to put our resources in Greensburg, our resources in Planet Green, and we are going to try to make a difference."

On this day more than 300 people have packed into the USD 422 gym — a three-story steel building with a hardwood floor that went up after the storm — to see the first renderings of the proposed business incubator and other buildings in the master plan.

Seven months after the perfect storm, the City Council committed Greensburg to the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED Platinum standard for use of energy efficiency, water reuse and more. The city hired BNIM Architects of Kansas City to draw up a master plan that includes the first LEED Platinum building in the state of Kansas. (Nationwide, 63 buildings meet the stringent LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, Platinum guidelines.)

Before the presentation, I ask BNIM's Stephen Hardy, who will dazzle the crowd with a 3-D "flyover" animation of the new downtown, just how far he and his colleagues intend to push Greensburg.

"They're pushing us," says Hardy, a Salina native. "Every time we come to them with an idea, they say, 'Go further.' ... You look around at all that's happened because of their vision. It's an incredibly adept strategy, and they'll tell you it just makes sense. It's actually aligned really well with an agricultural ethos. They take to sustainability in a really deep way."

Later comes proof that the efforts are paying off: The GM dealership is also going to build LEED Platinum. John Deere is looking into it, too. Then some really big news. Chuck Banks, head of the government's USDA Rural Development program for Kansas, steps to the podium and declares that "a major U.S. corporation that I am not at liberty to identify" has pledged to provide "gap funding" for the city's new business incubator.

The crowd knows that Banks is referring to the gap between what the government has pledged in aid (about \$2 million) and the total cost of the building that is expected to bring green-friendly business from across the nation to Greensburg.

Gap funding, in other words, is future funding. The crowd leaps to its feet and claps and cheers, by Kansas standards, wildly.

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Steve Hewitt puts it all together when I ask him at the meeting what effect the cameras are having on commerce.

"Initially when we met with Discovery, we told them very clearly, 'We're willing to let you tell the story in a documentary-style format,' with the ability for us to feed off them to gain resources.

"But we told them, 'The first time it becomes a reality-based program and we see people starting to fight, you're gone. And I won't have to send you out of town because this community will.' "

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Discovery's ambition for Greensburg has kept growing. It's now called "The Greensburg Project" and will span four networks, including the main Discovery channel and sister network TLC, starting a few weeks ahead of Planet Green's launch in June.

Perhaps no one better embodies the transformation going on here than Mabel Schmidt, the woman in whose FEMA trailer I am standing. Schmidt, a retired nurse in her 80s, let herself, her sister and brother into the Greensburg Mennonite Church basement 10 minutes before the storm struck. When they resurfaced, all that remained of the building was a foundation slab.

Mabel shows me the blueprint of the house that her son is building for her. "We want to go as green as our funds allow us to," she says in a low voice. "We want to put in a geothermal heat system. Probably be years before they recoup that money that's spent."

She knows the difference between the two main energy wall systems (one uses foam, the other plywood). She knows about the demonstration house that Mother Earth News, published in Topeka, is putting up in town, with solar panels and other greenovations.

As we pull away from FEMAville, I'm thinking how likely it is that I'll see Mabel Schmidt on TV someday. Then again, maybe not. Maybe she's just like everyone else in Greensburg.