

# QUESTION

amid the Kansas rubble



By Larry W. Smith, European Pressphoto Agency

**Picking through the wreckage:** Neil Trummel, left, David Allison, center, and Cody Hayes move a metal press across what used to be the garage of their home in Greensburg, Kan., on Tuesday. A tornado destroyed most of the town.

## Can this town be saved?

By Emily Bazar and Alan Gomez  
USA TODAY

GREENSBURG, Kan. — Since her father died three years ago, Cindy Munk has tried to persuade her mother to leave Greensburg and join Munk in Salina, 162 miles away. No matter how many times she asked, her mother's answer was the same.

"I'd tell her, 'I love my house. I love my church. And I love my job. Those are things I am not quite ready to leave,'" Judy Marshall, 66, recalls. "Now I've lost all three."

So Marshall — like some of her neighbors blasted out of their homes by the massive tornado that killed nine people here May 4 and destroyed 95% of this farm town of 1,400 — has decided to leave the community where she was born.

Struck by an overwhelming sense of loss and the daunting notion of rebuilding from scratch, Marshall and others are

Greensburg aims to rebuild after the tornado. If it can, it's likely to re-emerge as a smaller, younger community.

### Cover story

regretfully saying goodbye.

City leaders and other residents are determined to rebuild — even though it could cost at least tens of millions of dollars in public and private money. They see a chance to make Greensburg a modern, well-planned community.

As Greensburg cleans up and prepares for years of reconstruction, some provocative questions hang over the tangle of storm-tossed bricks, wood and metal: Can the town be saved? And if so, will enough folks return to make it the community it was 10 days ago, before the tornado?

Kansas State University professor Richard Goe, who has studied the development of rural communities, isn't so sure. On paper, he says, it may not make fiscal sense for the town to come back after near-destruction because Greensburg residents could

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was home to a theater, banks, a drugstore and other businesses, many of them catering to the town's elderly population.

If many elderly residents follow Marshall's lead and move elsewhere to be closer to relatives,

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medical care or other necessities rather than begin an arduous rebuilding process, fewer businesses would be likely to survive.

Greensburg City Administrator Steve Hewitt acknowledges such challenges but says many other factors are in Greensburg's favor. For one, it's the county seat of Kiowa County, so state and local government has an interest in the town remaining vibrant.

Beyond that, Hewitt says, "there's history here. There are families that go back five or six generations. You can't put a price on small towns."

Goe agrees that money isn't the only factor in the debate over rebuilding and that the strong emotional and family ties small-town residents often have to their communities are not easily broken. He says he expects Greensburg to eventually re-emerge as a smaller town, with a younger population.

For now, Hewitt and other town officials count on residents whose outlook is like that of Alan Todd, 37. Todd says he won't leave Greensburg, even though his house was destroyed by the tornado. He's staying at a farm a few miles north of town.

Todd says that he's the fourth generation in his family to live in the county and that he appreciates the town's neighborly lifestyle.

"By God, there's going to be Todds in this county for a long time. So, hell yes, we're rebuilding," he says. "We've been through droughts and blizzards. This is another complication in the road."

### Agriculture jobs decline

Greensburg traces its origins to homesteaders and settlers who sought land to farm and ranch.

Originally a stagecoach stop, it became a railroad town in 1887, when work began on a well for the water needed by steam locomotives. "That big well is still here," Hewitt says.

In fact, "the world's largest hand-dug well," at 109 feet deep and 32 feet wide, is one of the main attractions in Greensburg, which is 109 miles west of Wichita.

Together with a 1,000-pound meteorite that was found nearby, the well attracts 30,000-35,000 tourists a year, says Don Stimpson,

54, who works at a visitor's center for the well and meteorite. Both attractions survived the tornado; the visitor's center did not.

Before the tornado hit, oil, gas and trucking provided some jobs, but agriculture was king, says Mayor Lonnie McCollum, 61. Even so, agriculture — primarily corn, wheat, soybeans and milo — wasn't providing the economic boost it had in previous generations.

Greensburg's population had fallen steadily for decades, reflecting a trend in many small farming towns in Kansas, says David Burruss, director of the Ad Astra Institute, a Kansas public policy think tank. Automation and advances in farming technology led to less and less work for area residents.

"By and large, they don't have much of an economic base to keep them there," Burruss says.

Now, there's hardly an economic base at all.

The impact of the tornado that packed winds up to 205 mph was staggering: 961 single-family dwellings were destroyed, and 105 had major damage, says Angee Morgan of the Kansas Division of Emergency Management. Among businesses, 110 suffered heavy damage and 24 had minor damage, she says.

The devastation hasn't dissuaded local officials, who say they're committed to rebuilding and are taking the first critical step: struggling to bring utilities such as water and power back in service. "You have the opportunity to have a brand-new town," McCollum says. "Why not take it? Why not?"

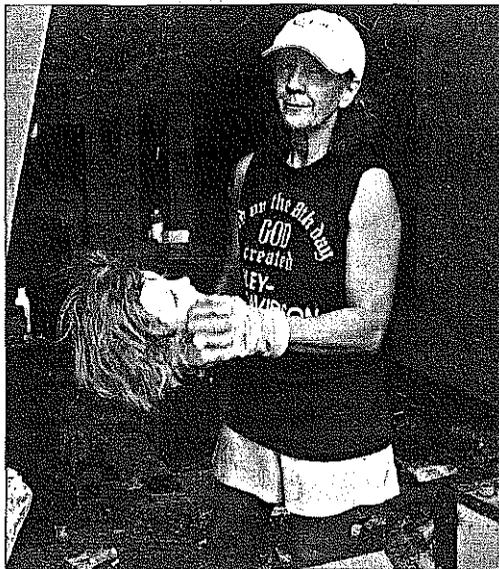
The model for local officials is unlikely to be the Gulf Coast areas overrun by Hurricane Katrina two years ago; the scope and complexity of that disaster is far beyond what happened here.

The more likely models for Greensburg are other small communities that chose to rebuild after being wrecked by natural disasters, says Federal Emergency Management Agency regional administrator Dick Hainje.

He notes that towns rebuilt virtually from scratch often don't take the same form. Hainje cites Spencer, S.D., a small town flattened by a tornado in 1998, as an example. The town rebuilt, "but not everybody came back," he says. "It was an elderly population, and there were very few jobs."

Rebuilding is more taxing on elderly residents, Hainje says. "They're very capable, but making an adjustment like this is difficult."

Assuming Greensburg comes back, Joseph Aistrup, head of the political science department at Kansas State University, foresees a drop in Greensburg's population,



By Emily Bazal, USA TODAY

**Committed to rebuilding:** Debbie Boyles, 52, cleans the Last Tangle, her beauty shop and tanning salon on Main Street in Greensburg.

particularly among the elderly.

"There is going to be some population drain," he says. "Even under the best of circumstances, some of these older folks who do need medical care close by will be relocated."

Doug Harrell, 84, a retired farmer and home builder, says he'll probably move in with his son, who lives 8 miles from town.

"I will not rebuild because of my age," says Harrell, whose home was destroyed. "I would if I were much younger."

Millie and Virgil Rush, who no longer have family in Greensburg and no longer have a home, are considering moving to the larger city of Pratt, about 30 miles away. "Our doctors are there," says Millie, 72. "Someday, we won't have someone to drive us out to the doctor."

Hewitt says he sympathizes with the special challenges elderly residents face.

"A lot of people won't be able to stay. We understand that," Hewitt says. "But a lot of people want to stay."

### 'A need for me to be here'

Hewitt and other leaders have ambitious plans for Greensburg. He says he'd like to make it a leader in environmentally sensitive design, and envisions green spaces, new schools and a new hospital.

moved in, bringing the town back to its pre-tornado population of just less than 300.

Sixty homes have been built, all the businesses have reopened

people of Greensburg. "Do not expect miracles. It's not going to happen overnight."

By Alan Gomez



**Hewitt:** Ambitious plans.

**Marshall:** Moving away.

"It's an opportunity to rebuild a rural community on the cutting edge," says Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, who says the city may consider innovations such as a municipal wind farm.

When President Bush toured the region Wednesday, brothers Kelly and Mike Estes told him the town needs infrastructure and industry to survive. They run the BTI John Deere dealership in town, which suffered \$23 million to \$25 million in damage, Kelly Estes says.

They said the city's survival depends on creating jobs quickly and urged Bush to promote ethanol and biodiesel in the area, a natural complement to the community's agricultural industry, they say.

During his visit, Bush promised Greensburg residents "whatever help is appropriate."

The brothers say he was receptive to their ideas and "perked up" at their suggestions.

"He was optimistic about ethanol," Mike Estes says.

Aistrup also promotes the concept of "value added" agriculture.

Currently, Greensburg farmers simply harvest crops and move them out of town, he says. The city can create jobs by processing those products in-town at cotton mills, ethanol production plants and elsewhere.

"If there's no jobs, where do people go?" Kelly Estes asks. "If residents get money for their houses, they're going" to leave.

Debbie Boyles, 52, hopes to offer jobs as soon as she's able. The Greensburg resident has owned the Last Tangle, a beauty shop and tanning salon, since 1990.

Boyles was one of the lucky ones. Her house survived the storm. Her shop did not. She says she feels a responsibility to rebuild, even if it's not in the same building on Main Street.

"I feel like there's a need for me to be here and to offer a service," she says as she picks up stray mannequin heads and hair rollers in her shop. "I'm staying."

Other business owners take a wait-and-see approach, including Starla McClain, who owns Starla's Stitch 'n' Frame.

She says her first choice is to rebuild, but she's also considering moving her custom framing and needlework shop to Pratt.

In part, she's waiting on her fellow shopkeepers to announce their intentions.

"A lot of it depends on what other businesses decide to do," she says. "I don't want to be the only business on Main Street."

Gomez reported from McLean, Va.

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