QUESTION
amid the Kansas rubble

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?

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

Cover story

By Emily Bazire 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 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

Please see COVER STORY next page
Cover story:

medical care or other necessities rather than begin an arduous rebuilding process. Larger businesses would be hard to resurface.

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

Beyond that, Hewitt says, "There's a little more. There are more businesses that go back five or six generations in the town's neighborly lifestyle. A lot of people want to stay. They're very capable, but they need the support of the people around them."

Kelly Estes asks, "We've been through a lot, but we're building back. We're not taking it. Why not?"

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

The more likely models for Greenberg are other small communities that choose to rebuild after being wrecked by natural disasters, says Federal Emergency Management Agency regional administrator Dick Harrell. He notes that towns rebuild virtually from scratch often don't take the same form. "The cities don't come back," he said. "We don't have a community that's been destroyed."

Millie and Virgil Ruth, who no longer own businesses in Greenberg, are considering moving to the larger city of Pratt, about 30 miles west. "If we decide to go there, we'll probably move in with Millie, who lives 8 miles from the town."

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