



## ***Field Notes:*** **Extreme Weather and Community Resilience**

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### **Better Than Before—Greensburg Rising**

At 7 p.m. on May 4, 2007, families in Greensburg, KS were washing dinner dishes and children were doing homework before bedtime. Nearly 3 hours later, at 9:45 p.m., an EF5 [tornado](#) slashed through, with winds estimated at 205 mph and a path 1.7 miles wide, which was wider than the city. Dazed survivors that night struggled to find loved ones and shelter in the unreal landscape that had been their community. 95% of the homes, business, school, church and municipal buildings were destroyed and the remaining 5% badly damaged.

When the tornado hit Greensburg and Kiowa County, the game clock for advanced planning ticked down to zero. Residents faced that roaring vortex in gathering darkness with whatever protection they had already put in place. Fortunately, the city's warning sirens gave 20 minutes notice to seek shelter. Despite the horrific property damage, that 20 minutes helped greatly to restrict the human loss to 11 loved family and friends.

The stark reality of the next morning in Greensburg captured a dilemma faced every day across the nation by community officials, planning and first-responder teams, businesses and citizens alike. How much preparation for damage from extreme weather is enough? What should be the priorities? What preventive actions and costs are necessary and when? These basic questions arise for all extreme weather risks, whether tornadoes, floods, wildfires, droughts, extreme precipitation, or others.

Until recent years, best answers to these questions came from state and local authorities in the form of risk assessments, such as the U.S. FEMA Multi-hazard Mitigation [Plans](#). These periodic assessments clarify the potential human and property damage risks of disasters and are often the basis for protective actions. But, in many jurisdictions, the plans often do not look beyond the crucial immediacy of damage avoidance and disaster response. Multi-hazard plans are frequently prepared by emergency or fire departments that will be the first professional responders. Not surprisingly, the plans often focus more on [immediate response](#) to critical life and death responsibilities than on longer-term community resilience. Strengthening communication and cooperative ties among differing sectors of the community is often treated as a lesser priority.

The cold dawn reality a city like Greensburg faces is that disaster recovery forces residents to confront a much wider range of issues than is presented by the immediate crisis of disaster response. Under the worst possible circumstances, ordinary residents face the loss of family or friends, loss of homes and their physical world, loss of businesses, jobs and the everyday structure of life; and they are forced to re-think their community. They must then summon the emotional, organizational and economic resources to shape the kind of community they want for the future.

In the case of Greensburg, the physical city was shattered. Its population of 1,574 in 2000, fell to 777 by 2010 in response to business, residential and other losses from the disaster. But the living core of the community survived. Starting the next morning, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007, residents

began a painful debate over whether to rebuild or abandon the city. Over several months, a consensus emerged to plan and rebuild a better future—together.

This May, Greensburg is [celebrating](#) the 5-year anniversary of its ordeal, the resiliency of its residents and Greensburg Rising. It is a work in progress; with the emphasis on progress.

A critical element in moving forward was the decision to involve everyone in the city—not just specialists and political leaders—to define the community and economy they would rebuild. This strategy, of tapping the skills, resources, cooperative networks, and ideas of the whole community, was central to long-term recovery planning from day one. It enabled residents, who best understood Greensburg’s strengths, to build on them to create better services, facilities, and business opportunities for the community.

In Greensburg, city and Kiowa County staff familiar with planning, land use issues, construction standards, and development approval worked closely with a FEMA long term recovery team and other agencies. The intensive 12-weeks of facilitated planning meetings involved local, state and federal agencies, business owners, civic groups, and residents. Apart from agency staffs, few had professional planning training. But they did have the diversity of skills, life experience and gritty determination that was crucial to envisioning how to rebuild their city. The resulting Long-Term Community Recovery [Plan](#) for Greensburg and Kiowa County captured a vision of community, facilities and services would better serve the future they wanted. The breadth of views, skills and buy-in of this broad slice of the community formed the vital core of Greensburg’s community resilience planning.

The story of Greensburg does not end there; it is still being created. But the early years of the city’s recovery underscore a crucial foundation that we all can learn from. Community resilience is first and foremost the result of all sectors of a community working together to protect and improve its future. Understanding the solid diversity of the needs, resources, and skills of the whole community is the starting point for that cooperation. The next step is using all these resources and the informal communication and cultural links that exist in every community. Building community resilience can begin at any time—hopefully and least painfully before an extreme weather disaster; but also after the event, as occurred one May evening in 2007 in Kansas.

### **How to Get Involved**

RRI would like to hear from you. If you have questions, comments, or concerns, please contact us at:

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