

A Sustained Response

Home Lumber Returns to Greensburg, Kansas to Help Community Rebuild After Tornado

Two weeks after the storm, when the National Guard started letting people back into town, what Home Lumber President and General Manager John Humphreys remembers most is that you could see clear across town, with the exception of a couple of buildings that withstood the storm. "All you could see above the rubble were trees that had been clipped off 10 to 12 feet above the ground," he says.

Most tornadoes don't make national news. When they do, it's usually a story of the tragedy and devastation that it caused. The tornado that leveled the town of Greensburg, Kan., in May 2007 made national news for the same reason. The two-mile wide F5 tornado cut a path directly through the heart of the rural south central Kansas community. What has kept the town in the national spotlight for the

past two years, however, is how Greensburg is not only rebuilding, but reinventing itself using environmentally sustainable building practices to remain a viable community.

John Humphreys, president and general manager of Home Lumber, has a unique perspective on the events that have taken place in Greensburg since the storm hit. First, Greensburg is located just 50 miles northeast of his hometown of Ashland, Kan., where the 16-store chain is based. In fact, Humphreys actually saw the storm take form on its way to Greensburg. Perched on a hill about a mile outside of town, he recalls, "We saw it come in and touch down and bounce back up. It continued on to the northeast. It was just a huge, ugly storm."

At the time, Humphreys didn't know what an integral part Home Lumber would play in both the search and rescue efforts as well as the rebuilding of Greensburg. But like the many other first responders from neighboring towns, several people from neighboring Home Lumber locations (including Roy Hoffman and Kim Hazen from the Ashland office) were involved in the initial search and rescue efforts. "Our first dire thought was that the community was very fortunate not to have a higher death toll from a tornado that was as wide as the town itself," Humphreys says.

THE RELIEF EFFORT

One of the first calls Humphreys made was to Blish-Mize President and CEO John Mize to organize a shipment of needed supplies. "I remember when I called John Mize, he said, 'I was just thinking about calling you,' followed by 'what do we need to do?'" In short order, Humphreys and Mize organized a shipment of supplies donated by the two companies to help with the search and rescue efforts.

While they faced some initial roadblocks getting the shipment into town, Humphreys knew just who to call next. "The Red Cross wasn't responding to our inquires to bring these products into town, so I called a State Representative from Greensburg and he told us to bring it on in," he says. "We actually had to smuggle it in because

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While the exterior of the Home Lumber location in Greensburg, Kan., was not complete at press time, this rendering shows what it will look like when finished. Out back is a 4,000-square-foot pole barn with lumber racking and additional lean-to storage (bottom photo).



the Red Cross didn't want the liability of distributing chain saws and power equipment, which were products the community desperately needed."

TIES TO COMMUNITY

Home Lumber had served Greensburg for years from its locations in Pratt and Coldwater, Kan. These locations would be instrumental in getting needed supplies to the community in the period directly following the storm. But when the local hardware retailer decided not to reopen for business, Humphreys and his team decided that to efficiently serve the community, they needed a local presence. "We got to the point where we were running several trucks from Pratt to Greensburg daily. We were on the road all the time, so we decided to find a location in Greensburg where we could set up shop." In short order, they were able to lease a site with a damaged building that could be renovated, along with a paved lot that could accommodate a makeshift lumber storage area.

Another major consideration for deciding to relocate in Greensburg was the appreciation that people in the community have shown. "Many of our customers in Greensburg are friends, relatives and longtime customers from our neighboring stores," Humphreys says. "We even have customers from when we operated a store in Greensburg from 1936 up until 1969. The local people have really invited us to stay," which he says has been very gratifying and something you can only truly appreciate when you live and work in a small town.

A SUSTAINABLE EFFORT

National headlines since the disaster have largely focused on a rural American town that is rebuilding itself using green building practices. In fact, The Discovery Channel has documented much of the rebuilding efforts and challenges, which has provided the town continued national (even international) exposure. As a result, many "green" product donations and corporate sponsorships continue to find their way to Greensburg.

But Humphreys is also anxious to see how other sustainability issues will play out with this experiment, specifically the ability for a dwindling rural community to remain viable to its residents. "We've owned around 50 stores over the last 103 years in many small rural towns throughout Kansas and Oklahoma, and we've seen some communities thrive and some turn into ghost towns during that time," he says. Despite the city leaders taking some heat at the beginning when they started developing a comprehensive plan based on green building practices, Humphreys says they did it with good reason. "They slowed things down and starting thinking outside of the box to design a community that's going to be attractive enough to bring people back and attract newcomers."

Like many towns in rural America, Greensburg had an aged population living in 750 homes that were 50 to 60 years old on average, and for the most part, under-insured. But with the insurance money they had to rebuild, along with state and federal grant money, low-interest loans and cooperation from the USDA rural housing agency, there is a considerable pool of money to invest. Couple that with the numerous corporate donations and sponsorships, and there is a real potential for success, says Humphreys.



The interior of the Greensburg Home Lumber location features a 2,500-square-foot salesfloor full of core hardware products supplied by Blish-Mize. The retailer took an existing damaged building and brought it up to energy efficiency standards with conventional insulated 2x6 framing, an insulated slab, low-flow toilets and high-efficiency fixtures and HVAC equipment.

GREEN RETAILING

The Pratt crew, led by Myron Bartel, made the cold calls to establish the initial connection. The first FEMA project called for traditional building materials and hardware items, such as treated lumber for decks and ramps, electrical and plumbing hook-ups and even grounding rods for the 350 FEMA trailers that appeared on the scene. But to supply the ongoing rebuilding efforts, Humphreys knew they had to beef up their education on many green products, even though they have been in the “green retailing” business for many years.

Products ranging from radiant barrier sheathing to high efficiency water heaters and low-flow toilets are commonly sold through Home Lumber’s Greensburg location, along with ZipWall systems, low VOC paints and other Energy Star products, such as windows and doors. “You also have to remember that lumber is a green item,” he adds. “We’ve had access to the best possible resources,



The Greensburg Home Lumber crew includes Doug Melton (left) and Branch Manager Jeff Koehn, who like most Greensburg residents lost his home in the tornado. The Greensburg store is being operated as a branch of the Pratt store to share staffing and other resources as needs grow.

including the U.S. Department of Energy’s National Renewable Energy Lab, area vocational schools, the U.S. Green Building Council and the National Association of Home Builders.”

When it came time to set the new store, Humphreys had access to the expertise that Blish-Mize has been providing the retailer for over a century, including product distribution support and space allocation expertise. “Blish-Mize has been very helpful determining space allocation for our Greensburg location. We rely heavily on them for that information. And Doug Weathers (Home Lumber’s Blish-Mize sales rep) and Clay Uhrmacher both take a personal interest to make sure it is done efficiently,” he says. “John and Jonathan Mize are so supportive of what we’re doing, they are always asking what they can do to help. I don’t think we could have had a better team in place to quickly establish a small store that we are very proud of right now. We are also very proud to be part of this community’s efforts.”



Not Your Ordinary Rural Kansas Town

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards have been the basic blueprint for rebuilding the community of Greensburg, Kan. Buildings with structural insulated panels (SIPs) and insulated concrete forms (ICFs) are common building practice. But even conventional framing practices can be environmentally friendly if proper care is taken. “What we’ve learned through all of this is that building a green structure is a system, not just products,” says Home Lumber’s John Humphreys. “If you can construct the building envelope correctly and pay attention to details that don’t always get paid attention to, you can really have a phenomenally efficient structure. It’s the simple things like getting a thermal barrier for your slab, or insulating the rim joist around the bottom of your house, that can really make a difference.”

To date, there are several LEED Platinum commercial buildings that are being constructed in Greensburg, including the hospital, the city building, the community arts studio, the business incubator, a farm equipment dealer and a car dealership. The Platinum distinction represents the highest level of energy efficiency rated by the agency. According to Humphreys, the local independent businesses, such as the flower shops and hair dressers, etc., are the slowest to make a decision to return. However, through local incentives and encouragement it will surely happen.