

GRAND RAPIDS NEWS

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Mayor of Kansas city destroyed by tornado to discuss rebuilding green at conference

By [The Grand Rapids Press](#)

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GRAND RAPIDS -- Bob Dixon gives a nod to Great Plains settlers when he talks about building a sustainable future. After all, "rural people are the original 'green' people," said the mayor of a Kansas town leveled two years ago by a tornado.

Now, Greensburg, Kan., is returning to those roots by rebuilding itself on green principles.

"We're the new pioneers of the 21st century," Dixon said. "We live in the most exciting time in history right now in the United States.

"We have the opportunity to truly make some historic and meaningful decisions right now that will really leave our legacy to those future generations."

Dixon will give the keynote address Thursday at a GreenTown: The Future of Community conference at Grand Valley State University. He will talk about his city's commitment to rebuild its public facilities to platinum-certified Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards.

About 250 public officials, municipal planners, architects, developers and builders are expected to take part. Dixon will urge them to follow Greensburg's example.

"The only thing we had left was each other," Dixon said about the tornado's aftermath. "We met in a circus tent. We planned together. We ate together. We worshipped together. We did everything together. We had basically a City Council of several hundred people."

The event, which includes pre-conference workshops today, will showcase cost-effective, ecologically sustainable development through case studies of Greensburg and Grand Rapids, which has the country's most LEED-certified buildings per-capita.

"Often the private sector is driving change on the public sector side," said John Harris, president of a5 Group Inc., which is running the conference with nonprofit Seven Generations Ahead. "This is an opportunity for people to see each other and network and walk away with actionable information.

"Now, even though unemployment's at 15 percent (in Michigan) and it's tough times economically, these are the times you can drive real change and real innovation."

IF YOU GO

Public officials and private-sector professionals will gather to pursue sustainable development

When: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Thursday, with preconference workshops 1-5 p.m. today.

Where: Grand Valley State University's DeVos Center, 401 W. Fulton St.

Cost: Main conference fees range from \$75 to \$295

Details: greentownconference.com

Dixon said he knows how something new can come from a challenge. He emerged from the basement of his home shortly after the May 4, 2007, tornado left 95 percent of Greensburg in ruin. The next night, as community leaders huddled in the courthouse basement to endure more strong storms, the idea of rebuilding Greensburg green was hatched. With oil prices soaring, economic factors were part of the motivation.

So was a religious desire to use natural resources efficiently, Dixon said.

"We understand we've been blessed with a tremendous opportunity here. We're like a living laboratory. We have a clean canvas. We can paint on it whatever we want.

"It's about planning and doing it right, like our ancestors did."

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