

The road to recovery in Faulkner County

By Shelby Fiegel

April 27, 2014, will be forever ingrained in the minds of Faulkner County citizens, specifically those from the cities of Vilonia and Mayflower. Last April, a devastating F4 tornado hit the two cities, causing major damage both physically and mentally for those affected. There were 16 fatalities and 193 injuries along the tornado's 43-mile trek. It was recorded as the deadliest tornado in the country during 2014 and the deadliest in Arkansas since 1968.

Though the road to recovery was an uphill battle, just over a year later both cities are on the track to a brighter future. They did not give up in the face of adversity. Instead the citizens united and looked at the destruction as an opportunity to strategically rebuild their communities better than they were before.

As Vilonia and Mayflower community leaders initiated the rebuilding process, the key to their success was long-term thinking. They recognized that the tornado recovery efforts were not going to be completed in a matter of months and understood there was a need to implement strategic plans that would enact positive

change, keep momentum high, and ensure everyone was working toward a common goal.

The first step to effective long-term recovery was to identify anchor organizations across the state that would act as partners, resource guides, and knowledge centers. Vilonia and Mayflower partnered with a variety of groups at the federal and state level to assist them throughout the recovery process. Federal agencies were effective at collecting data, developing reports, providing recommendations, and developing solutions to complex issues, but those agencies only had a short window of time in which they were available to be utilized. Once those agencies completed their assignments, it was up to other organizations such as the University of Central Arkansas's Center for Community and Economic Development, Central Arkansas Planning and Development District, University of Arkansas at Little Rock's Institute for Economic Advancement, Metroplan, and the University of Arkansas's Community Design Center to make that data digestible, help those recommendations come to fruition and assist the communities in developing their action plans.



UCA's Center for Community and Economic Development hosted Faulkner County Economic Development Boot Camp to help local leaders move from recovery mode to planning mode.



Training sessions at the boot camp helped participants create strategic plans for moving forward.

The rebuilding effort also created an opportunity for local leaders to explore new possibilities for economic development. Leaders in both cities kept an open mind and were extremely receptive to suggestions and knowledge imparted on them by experts in the fields of disaster recovery and community and economic development. As a result of their efforts, several initiatives were completed in the last year, including:

- A long-range plan for redevelopment, which included community visioning meetings and development of zoning regulations.
- Funding of a recovery coordinator and support staff for one year. The recovery coordinator took on the role of economic developer for both cities, making the position the first of its kind in either community.
- A Benchmarking Tour of Arkadelphia, the goals of which were to understand how an Arkansas city responded to a natural disaster that impacted the central business district and hear about long-term economic development efforts that have gained traction in Arkadelphia and Clark County.
- The first ever Faulkner County Economic Development Boot Camp, held by UCA's Center for Community and Economic Development. The boot camp included training sessions and planning simulations presented by community and economic development professionals from across Arkansas.
- Vilonia began the development of a brand with the Center and LaGrone Design. The city, which previously had no established brand, recognized

the need for one during their recovery efforts. The new brand includes a logo and tagline that will establish a significant and differentiated presence for Vilonia among other communities.

Using all the resources at their disposal, Vilonia and Mayflower started to lay the foundation for their strategic action plans that would lead them into a prosperous future. Once the action plans were developed and adopted, elected officials, community leaders, grassroots organizations (such as the Rebuild Vilonia Committee), and various other community organizations were each assigned a role to play within the execution of the plans.

Vilonia and Mayflower have received an estimated \$8 million in state and federal grants, with the possibility for more funding in the future.

Over a year has passed since the April 27 tornado and both cities are on the fast track to moving from "tornado recovery" to "economic development" as their mind set.

For more information on preparing your community for resilience, or best practices for economic development following a disaster, contact UCA's Center for Community and Economic Development at ccd@uca.edu.



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