

Appalachian Town Reinvents Itself

The Town of Grundy, VA has said “no more” to its legacy of flooding and is moving its downtown to higher ground. Located near the Kentucky border in the heart of what was once Appalachian coal country, the town has been hit hard by the major floods of 1937, 1957, 1977 and 1993. The flood of 1977 was particularly menacing, with flood waters on Main Street rising as high as 5 feet. Merchants and retailers began to throw in the towel and

vacate the shops lining Main Street. But Grundy is the county seat and the heart of Buchanan County, and for more than 20 years its town leaders have been hammering out a plan to save it. Through an intensive local, state and federal agency collaboration, the wheels are in motion to build a new downtown for Grundy – one that incorporates energy-efficient and sustainable design practices.

The town has formed a Rebuild

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Rendering depicts view from bridge linking “old” Grundy to its new downtown.



Appalachian Town

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View from Route 460 to Grundy's new downtown.

America partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to make the most of this opportunity to create a smart downtown with a promising future. Town Manager **Chuck Crabtree** is leading the partnership.

A cost-cutting and cost-sharing collaboration among government agencies has paid big dividends. Town plans to move to safer ground got a big boost when VDOT realized it would save \$77 million if it nixed plans to bypass the town with the construction of Route 460, which will stretch across Virginia to the Kentucky border when complete. By taking the road through the existing town, VDOT could spare some of the considerable expense of blasting through mountain rock to create a bypass. Town leaders are betting that the infusion of traffic through the town will give it a new lease on life. Grundy's new downtown will be located out of the flood zone and directly across the Levisa River on a 13-acre site donated by Norfolk & Southern Railroad that will be prepared by the Corps.

Most of the 39 buildings comprising Grundy's downtown were built in the 1940s. Half of them still have inefficient coal-fired furnaces. Battered by flood waters, full of mud and beyond repair — all but a few will be torn down. VDOT plans to build a levee to protect the court house, bank, sheriff's office, post office and the historic Buchanan County House. Nearby homes that have not been abandoned or bought out in anticipation of the new road, will be floodproofed which entails positioning the HVAC system significantly higher on the building.

The new downtown will feature a mix of shops, restaurants, and office and municipal buildings arranged around an attractively landscaped pedestrian plaza. Multifamily and

single family homes will also be part of the new downtown. The partnership is working with the U.S. Department of Energy to incorporate energy-efficiency strategies into buildings in the new downtown. A bridge and a pedestrian walkway will provide the links from the existing community to the new downtown. Plans also call for developing a scenic riverwalk and pedestrian bridge along the waterfront of the old downtown.

"We're turning the river into an asset instead of a liability," he says.

Grundy Rebounds

Buchanan County has the highest unemployment rate in Virginia and Crabtree maintains that Grundy's new town will bring 400 new jobs to the town.

Grundy is rebounding not only from flooding but from a reliance on the coal industry. The town is "mined out," Crabtree says, and is working to diversify into cleaner industries. Attracting incubator businesses to the area to create business opportunities and stimulate the economy is one avenue the town is pursuing. The town has also been working with Virginia Technical Institute to make Grundy the first wireless community.

As Crabtree points out: "Running fiber optic cable in the mountains is cost prohibitive."

By collaborating with local, state and federal agencies, the plan to move Grundy's downtown to the opposite side of the river has been reduced from its original estimated cost of \$350 million to \$160 million. In addition to VDOT's savings of \$77 million by avoiding the costs of a bypass, the Corps has saved \$100 million in floodproofing costs. The town originally was to have contributed \$25 million to the project — a tall order for this economically depressed area — but given the savings realized, it can now invest those funds elsewhere.

This fall, Grundy plans to break ground on the first building in its new downtown — a fire station. The new building will incorporate an efficient electric heating and cooling system in lieu of a kerosene-fueled furnace, quality insulation, drop ceilings and a separate heating system for the garage, the training quarters and office space.

"With the Town of Grundy's Rebuild America partnership, we are striving to help the environment, reduce the impact of the energy crisis, and stimulate the economy at the same time by creating housing and jobs," Crabtree says.

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