

‘I can see the light’: Year after flood, Clendenin recovery continues

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By [Lori Kersey](#)

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CLENDENIN, W.Va. — Once a busy grocery store, the interior of Smith’s Foodfair in Clendenin is dark, its parking lot practically empty.

One year after the June 2016 flood, the only [grocery store](#) in town limits has not reopened, and its owners say they don’t know if it ever will.

“There’s so many families [who have] left the Clendenin area,” co-owner Jim Smith said. “Is it going to be worth coming back in with the business?”

The Smiths own several buildings — some are businesses they operate and some are leased. For them, it wasn’t just the Clendenin Foodfair. Twelve of their buildings, including the entire Elkview Shopping Plaza, were damaged in the flood. Smith’s home was flooded, as was his son’s.

“We’ve got all [of] them back,” Smith said of the shopping plaza and their houses. The Clendenin Family Dollar store, which the Smiths own, is set to reopen early next month.

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The Foodfair, though, is in a sort of limbo. Smith said, between the town’s population loss and a flooded Herbert Hoover High School closing, the Clendenin area might not offer enough business to support a grocery store.

At least one measure indicates that more than 180 households have left the area since the flood. The Elk Valley Public Service District’s customer count has dropped from 4,775 before the flood to an 11-month average of 4,593, manager Tim Chapman said.

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The PSD's service area includes Clendenin, Falling Rock, Elkview, Mink Shoals, Big Chimney and Meadowbrook to Charleston's city limits. Most of the customer loss has come from the Falling Rock and Clendenin areas. Chapman said such a customer loss is highly unusual.

The PSD is asking the West Virginia Public Service Commission for a rate increase, because it doesn't have the customers to support its operating costs, Chapman said. The PSD has no other explanation but the flood to account for the drop in customers, he said.

Chapman is encouraged, though, that the customer count seems to have dropped to its lowest in March and has increased since then. That would indicate that people are getting their houses repaired and moving back in, he said.

Smith said the Foodfair drew customers from Roane and Clay counties, as well.

"And lot of those houses have been torn down, too," he said.

When you drive through Clendenin in the afternoon and evening, "there's nobody moving," Smith said. "It's like a ghost town. And to cap it all off, they pulled the school [out]. That was a major thing, when they pulled the Herbert Hoover school out."

Kanawha County Schools officials are interested in rebuilding Herbert Hoover at a site near Given Fork, in Elkview, said Briana Warner, communications director for the school district. Officials are considering a site along Big Creek, in Elkview, for a consolidated Bridge and Clendenin elementary school.

"If you were getting married or was a young person getting started, would you want to build in an area where there wasn't a school?" Smith asked.

He said he wonders why the school board can't rebuild the school at the Hoover site. He points out a school in Louisiana that was built back after sustaining damage but is now raised several feet off the ground.

"If they can do it in Louisiana, why can't they do it here?" Smith wondered. "The federal government doesn't have two sets of rules."

Warner said rebuilding Hoover at its original location isn't an option.

“The new high school cannot be built in its current location because state policy does not allow for a school to be rebuilt in a flood plain,” she said. “The Hoover site is actually in a floodway. Kanawha County Schools is working closely with state officials, as well as FEMA officials, through every step in the rebuilding process.”

Smith said that, while it was open, the Clendenin store did well for them. Now, though, he would be afraid to reopen.

The store’s sheet rock has been replaced and it’s been cleaned. Smith said reopening would cost probably \$2.5 million in inventory and operating costs.

“If they built that school back, there’d be no question in my mind that we’d go back with a store,” he said.

‘We’re going to make it’

A year ago, Mayor Gary Bledsoe didn’t know if the town of Clendenin was going to survive.

He said 90 to 95 percent of the town’s businesses were damaged or destroyed by the flood. Besides the loss of businesses, the flood sent 3 feet of water into the main floor of Town Hall and inundated offices in the basement. Five feet of water got into the town’s recreation center. The town lost \$25,000 in hand tools, lawnmowers and other equipment, Bledsoe said. Town roads were damaged.

Town Hall operated out of a garage for two months, then moved to a trailer while repairs were being made.

A year later, in a rebuilt Town Hall office, Bledsoe was more hopeful. Speaking a few days before the [election he lost](#) to [Shana Trippett Clendenin](#), Bledsoe said the town’s tax base is beginning to come back. He estimates that about 80 percent of the businesses that were flooded have reopened.

“Now I can see the light,” he said. “The town of Clendenin, we’re going to make it. It’s that simple.”

Before the flood, the town had just prepared its budget, with nearly \$660,000 in estimated general revenue for the upcoming year and was in “good shape,” financially, Bledsoe said. The town’s 2016-17 budget, which went into effect July 1, 2016, included an

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estimated \$200,000 in business and occupation taxes and nearly \$200,000 in property taxes. The town had been replacing old equipment and paving streets.

When the flood hit, the town shut down spending, except for fuel, equipment and employee salaries.

“Spending just came to a halt,” he said.

Later, when officials had a chance to assess the damage, they cut the budget by about 35 percent, anticipating the loss in the town’s business and occupation tax.

“It’s slowly improving every month, but we still cut the budget close to 35 percent, just to make sure we did spend within our means,” Bledsoe said. “And so far, we’ve been able to do that. The bills are paid and we have some money in the bank, so we’re doing OK. The town of Clendenin is solid.”

The town’s budget for the fiscal year that starts in July estimates about \$450,000 in overall general revenue and indicates that there will be \$140,000 in B&O taxes and \$145,000 in property taxes.

Bledsoe said the town’s population loss will be at a minimum. Many whose houses were flooded have moved back in, he said. FEMA plans to build 10 houses in Clendenin, and other recovery groups are planning to build six or seven more, he said.

“Population loss is not going play a big part in this,” Bledsoe said.

On Main Street, the town’s first Mexican restaurant, Julio’s, has recently opened. Residents say that, since the restaurant opened, the downtown area has been busier than it has been in years.

Another downtown restaurant, Mama Payne’s, is in the process of reopening, he said. Mama Payne’s didn’t respond to a message, but its [Facebook page](#) indicates it will open again at a new location.

Beside the Foodfair, the Tudor’s Biscuit World/Gino’s combination hasn’t reopened, and the business’ owners and the Smiths, who own the building, say they don’t know if it will. Poca Valley Bank is working to reopen its Clendenin branch, he said.

‘We want to see it thrive’

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But while Bledsoe thinks the town is recovering well, others say the town government hasn't done enough to drive economic development. The town's economy was struggling before the flood, said Susan Jack, a Clendenin resident and the director of the Greater Kanawha Longterm Recovery Committee.

"I think a lot of us here that live here in town would like to see the town not only just survive, we want to see it thrive, as it did 20, 30 years ago," Jack said. "That's our goal. Our goal is not just to recover from this flood, our goal is to recover and thrive as a town, a community, economically."

Jack stressed that her opinions about the town government don't reflect those of the rest of the committee.

Before the flood, Jack had planned to move with her daughter to Ohio and a better economy. When the flood hit, [she instead bought a house within town limits](#) and volunteered with recovery efforts for months without a job, before [starting as GKLRC director](#) a little more than two months ago.

It was Jack who approached the owner of Julio's with the idea of opening in Clendenin. He had been working at the Mexican restaurant at Crossings Mall, which was closed when its culvert entrance bridge was washed away by floodwater.

Jack had wanted to run for mayor this year, but although she's lived in the area on and off all her life, she only recently moved into town limits. A town ordinance requires mayoral candidates to live in town a full year before filing to run.

Jack said the town lacks an economic development plan, which would help in its flood recovery effort. She and others have been working independently on plans to better the town economically, she said.

"This town needs to evolve," Jack said. "There are a lot of us here in town that, I think, really feel that a strong economic development plan right now is a huge priority to go hand-in-hand with full recovery from the flood. Because, you know, business and the economy can help your flood recovery so much. I mean tremendously. One kind of feeds the other.

"It's not just about getting people in their homes; we're getting people into their homes," she said. "But we've got to create an environment, a town and a community that people want to live in, and that requires business and economic development and jobs."

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‘People are ready for change’

Shana Trippett Clendenin [won the town’s June 13 election](#) with 139 votes to Bledsoe’s 94 votes. Bledsoe has been [mayor for four years](#) and was on the Town Council for 12 years. This was Trippett Clendenin’s first time running.

“I think people are ready for change,” Trippett Clendenin said about her election. “I think the flood hit and the status quo just isn’t what they want anymore. Not that Gary’s ever done a bad job; I don’t think he has. I just think that I have a lot of energy and lot of motivation, and I’m not afraid to reach out to people and make the connections the town needs.”

Trippett Clendenin, 31, moved to town only three years ago, but her last name is well known. She married into the Clendenin family, whose ancestors founded the town, as well as the city of Charleston. Her father-in-law, Kevin, is the chief of the town’s volunteer fire department. Her husband’s late grandfather, [James Clendenin](#), was a mayor of the town.

Trippett Clendenin says her priorities are flood recovery and new business. She said she wants to sit down with business owners and investors and see what the town can do to help them.

She also wants to hear from people about their ideas for the town. For too long, there’s been a disconnect between residents and the town government, Trippett Clendenin said.

“That’s my job,” she said, “to hear the voice of the people of Clendenin.”

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