After Blast, West Fights to Keep Residents

NOMAAN MERCHANT, Associated Press

WEST, Texas (AP) — John Crowder stood on the gray concrete slab where his house once was, pointing out one spot after another. There was the garage where an overflow of guests would eat their Christmas dinner. There was the dining room where he ate meals with his wife and college-bound daughter.

A home spray painted with a heart and an inspirational message, damaged by the fertilizer plant explosion along Reagan Street is shown Friday, May 31, 2013, in West, Texas. Town officials and many lifelong residents desperately want to keep people from moving away, but they face a long fight ahead of them. **(AP Photo/Tony Gutierrez)**

There was the chair where he would have been sitting, had he been home the night of the fertilizer plant explosion that ruined his home and many others in West.

"All the memories come back to mind. You think about the good times you had there," said Crowder, who watched the house come down last week. "That was hard. But that's an important step. That's the only way to move forward."

The slabs popping up across town are one sign that the effort to rebuild West has just begun, almost two months after an explosion that killed 15, injured 200 and forever changed life here. Town officials and many lifelong residents desperately want to keep people from moving away, but they face many obstacles: rebuilding schools and water lines, helping residents who in some cases are short tens of thousands of dollars and reassuring residents that their once-tranquil streets will be safe again.

Many displaced residents promise they will try to come back, saying they missed West's quiet streets and friendly neighbors. Even by the standards of a small Texas town, roots run deep in a community where many of the last names, street names and bakeries serving kolache pastries still recall West's Czech origins.

But there's still no running drinkable water in the area closest to West Fertilizer Co., now a 93-foot-wide crater where investigators could not figure out what caused the blast. The school district hopes to put older students this fall in portable buildings on the lot where part of the middle school once stood. And it's unclear where many people, particularly residents of an assisted-living center partially caved in after the blast, will come back to live.

"We want people in West — that's my charge," said Tommy Muska, the town mayor. "My job is to keep them here and to convince them, one way or the other, to plan on building."

Muska said he hoped to replace damaged water and sewer lines throughout town at an estimated cost of $3 million. For now, crews are demolishing ruined homes and clearing them away, breaking a weekslong quiet on many streets with the loud rumble of excavators smashing through walls.

Even if infrastructure comes back, money is still a challenge for those trying to rebuild their homes. Phil Immicke, associate pastor of First Baptist Church in West, said he kept hearing the same thing after the blast. Demolition was costing residents anywhere from $10,000 to $20,000, with the money often coming out of an already too-small check for rebuilding their entire home.

Crowder, who is pastor of First Baptist, and Immicke have made demolition part of their ministry. The church used $200,000 in donations to knock down an initial 50 homes, with another 50 to come. The church borrowed construction equipment and volunteer work crews, using the donation money to pay for fuel and removing debris.

Immicke — a police officer who jokes that he's now a de facto construction foreman — said he sees the immediate impact demolition has on residents.

"When they walk into their lot and see a clean lot, they can say, "OK," and they can bring a contractor and say, 'This is what I want.'"

W.R. "Bo" Bohannan, 84, watched the home he lived in for 52 years get torn down last week. He told a work crew on the scene that he wanted them to try to save the trees in his front yard. Otherwise, he said he was ready to get going. As an excavator plowed through the back of the home, Bohannan watched without visible emotion.

Bohannan was inside the night of the blast, but escaped without serious injuries. He said his reason for staying, and not using his insurance payout to move somewhere else, was simple.

"My wife wanted to rebuild it, so we're going to rebuild it," he said.

Patricia Webre had lived in her home a few streets away since 1984. She held her new Bichon Frise dog, Levi, in her arms as her house was torn down last week by a

crew not affiliated with the church.

Her last dog had run out of the house during the blast and never came back. An occasional tear went down her cheek as she watched.

"This is the only home they grew up in," she said of her three children, who were also watching.

About 200 homes in West were destroyed or severely damaged. It's unclear how many of those homeowners were uninsured or underinsured. But two people who lost their homes said they expected to incur tens of thousands in costs above what they received through insurance.

"They just saw my situation differently than I did," said Crowder, who estimated his gap at about $60,000.

The federal Small Business Administration, through its disaster assistance program, has approved 70 low-interest home loans for about $5.8 million, with more applications pending, SBA spokesman Kevin Wynne said. Muska and other local officials are also organizing a charity effort to help residents with unmet needs. Volunteers have put up wood cubicles and offices in a theater that's now the center for residents needing help.

The people in charge of the center say they have potentially hundreds of volunteers who want to clean yards and build new buildings, but face an ongoing struggle to get residents who need help to ask for it. They also worry that a rash of recent disasters that have gotten national attention — the tornadoes in Moore, Okla., and North Texas among them — might lead to some donors forgetting about West.

"You've got to keep moving forward to let them be assured that West is going to rebuild, that there is going to be a community here of which you can raise your family in," said Susanne Nemmer, the recovery center's administrative coordinator.

She said her goal, as well as that of many others working in town, was not to build "bigger and better," but to restore the town to what it was: "Let's keep it West."

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West Long-Term Recovery: http://westltr.org/ [1]

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