

POINT OF VIEW

This old town still stands

By ANNE MARIE KNIGHTON

EDENTON – Edenton, a small coastal town in the northeastern part of the state, has long been referred to as the South's Prettiest Town. We are proud of the designation even though a few local historians are not quite sure who officially made this proclamation. But there is so much more to Edenton and to Chowan County -- Edenton is the county seat -- than being a pretty town.

We are a strong, proud and hard-working community. Hurricane Isabel has proved how strong we are. The devastation wrought by this Category 2 storm has been met by a Category 4 recovery effort.

Heroic rescues, rapid tree clearing and a monumental effort to rebuild the town's damaged electric system proved how strong we are. But many challenges remain.

The media have come and gone like the storm. The impression spread by some storm-chasing scribes up and down the East Coast, and even in on the front page of the Sunday Los Angeles Times, is that we are a community whose landscape has changed forever. "Paradise Lost" was the headline in The Washington Post.

"Bull feces," County Commission Chairman Louis Belfield politely responded,

"Many of our trees may be gone," he said, "but we are coming out of this disaster a stronger, better community."

As I write, a light rainstorm passes. The sound of wind and rain instantly brings fear. This I hope is a normal reaction for people who have lived through a catastrophic storm.

As the town manager here for the last 15 years, I pretty much know what ditches fill up, what streets hold water when we have a heavy rainstorm. I still can hardly believe the enormity of Isabel's wrath. The 7 to 9 feet of storm surge that literally slammed into our community caused tens of millions of dollars of damage to property. The 90-mile per hour winds caused extensive damage throughout the county; at least \$150 million in damages is attributable to them. Our community suffered one fatality. A tree slammed down on to a car, killing its young occupant. Pecan trees, pine trees, oak trees were uprooted in every neighborhood, all over our county. Not just a tree here or there, but everywhere.

U.S. Forestry Service personnel flew over the county shortly after the hurricane to assess the damages. The Forestry Service estimated that over 40 percent of the trees in the county were lost. Every day I hear residents expressing thanks over and over that there was not more loss of life.

Residents tell town and county officials how proud they are of the progress we have made: 140,000 cubic yards of debris cleared off of streets, 150 broken light poles repaired and miles of distribution lines restrung and repaired -- thanks to help from over 100 dedicated linemen and tree trimmers from public power communities all across the state and even from South Carolina. We have made tremendous progress, but we have so much work ahead of us. We worry about those that may be left behind.

As I drive through neighborhoods, now that the roads are cleared, I see so much damage. Huge trees uprooted, lying dead in yards. Houses lined with "FEMA roofs," the blue tarps. The cold weather is coming; how many of the roofs will be repaired before the winter cold comes? We hope all will be repaired quickly. But city manager friends who have been through Fran and Hugo tell us the recovery process is painfully slow.

FEMA checks are starting to roll in, but that program, for all the good intentions, does not cover all the losses. We have over 330 households that have been displaced due to storm damage. Five churches suffered severe damage. Kadesh I.M.E. Zion Church (1897), which is on the National Register of Historic Places, is currently condemned and is danger of being torn down.

We are grateful for the volunteers and church organizations that have come from all over to help. Some are still here, working tirelessly with chainsaws, tractors and rakes, clearing hazards and cleaning yards for many of our elderly, sick and needy residents. College students have contacted us, volunteering to come during fall break and help citizens with repairs and perhaps help clear fallen trees from creeks and streams.

There is much work to be done, and we hope that with help from friends and neighbors here at home and up and down the East Coast, that no one from our county will be left worse off because of this natural disaster.

(Anne Marie Knighton is Edenton's town manager.)

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