

Like a good neighbor: Fenton, Linden there for each other after disasters

By Linda Angelo and Christofer Machniak

"Worst things come in threes, so I'm waiting for the third worst thing to come," said Aaron Hilborn, 32, whose house sustained about \$20,000 in damage from the Aug. 24 tornado that hit Fenton. Neighboring Linden, meanwhile, wonders how to replace city history after fire gutted the historic downtown "Union Block" in May.

But old superstitions notwithstanding, what's next might be a plus: teamwork.

Despite their own hardships, officials, residents and business owners from both communities are helping their counterparts in the other.

"(Fenton City Manager Michael Senyko) was such a valuable resource for me since it was only my 10th day as city manager," Linden's Christopher Wren said of help he got after the fire.

"He came over and helped me out as an adviser, and when he had his situation, he called me up and asked, 'What did you do next, what did you experience,' and how did I handle things?"

"Even though we have had horrible disasters, the experience we gained was invaluable and will make southern Genesee County stronger," said Wren, who previously worked as Fenton's assistant city manager for six years.

Senyko said he and Fenton Mayor Sue Osborn came to Linden that night to offer any support - which is typical of the cooperation between the communities. He said their personal friendship also helps.

"He and I talk often about issues facing Linden and issues facing Fenton," he said. "That rapport works very well."

Jessica Eastman, owner of Serendipity Day Spa, reopened her business 10 days after the Linden fire destroyed the building it had been in. She had help from unexpected sources: several of her competitors.

Bill Arbour, owner of the Fenton Academy of Cosmetology, donated hydraulic chairs, shampoo bowls, hair dryers and mirrors - more than \$1,000 worth.

"I was shocked," Eastman said. "I wanted to cry tears of joy ... I have never met the man."

But amid the stories of cooperation, the communities are just beginning to understand the economic impact of the disasters, which likely could extend beyond their

borders to the southern region of Genesee County.

"More than likely, it's going to sting the community," said Michael LaFaive, fiscal policy director for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a free-market research institute. "I know of no net positive events from floods, fires and tornadoes. Destruction doesn't create wealth."

LaFaive said reconstruction investment only diverts resources that would have been used on other planned activity. Still, LaFaive said the good news is southern Genesee County is better off because it's been benefiting from the growth from northern Oakland County - although the state economy is dragging overall.

"Fenton had a larger-scale disaster," Wren said. "Within 36 hours, my fire was put out and the fence was up. In Fenton, it took weeks to clean up and they are still working on recovery."

"The impact in Linden is farther-reaching. I'm now out of a quarter of a city block of retail, but on the positive side this gives us the opportunity to rebuild and have an economic revitalization. We want to make sure people know Linden is open and people can shop down here."

Linden business owners say fewer people are milling the streets and browsing the shops downtown.

"There was more traffic down here before," said Laura Mathews, owner of the Linden Toy Factory. "People walked around and shopped. What I hear a lot of customers say now is they thought Linden was all gone."

Eastman is proving it's possible to start over. On Tuesday, she presented to the Historic District Commission plans to triple the size of her business.

The proposed spa would showcase a salon on the first floor and have massage and treatment rooms on the second floor. She also plans to open an adjoining wine cafe in the building next door now occupied by Mr. Appliance.

"I'm a big believer in that God put you in a position to challenge you, and you either get knocked down or take it as an experience and move forward," said Eastman, 30. "I look at this an opportunity to become better."