

Charlie Hudson described the city of Wellston as a typical Appalachian town that was built based on the coal industry.

Hudson grew up in Wellston. He remembers when the three main coal industry factories, which had helped create the town, closed. Eventually, General Mills moved its pizza roll plant into Wellston, which kept the town alive.

“Without them, the town probably would just cease to exist,” Hudson said.

Hudson said Wellston is starting to rebound as people have come to understand that manufacturing won't be returning to the area.

“The pandemic has actually proven that people don't have to drive to Columbus to work,” Hudson said. “People want to get out of cities, not just because of the pandemic, but with all the civil strife that's going on.”

So Wellston is starting to focus more on the tourism industry and taking advantage of the natural resources in the area, such as its proximity to Hocking Hills and the Baileys Trail System.

Ecotourism, Hudson said, makes sense. Wellston doesn't have the climate or usual resources for major factories to locate to the area. However, with broadband and remote working, Hudson said he does think it will become a more popular area for others to live.

In addition, lands once used for strip mining could be transformed into park lands.

“That also exposes us to people who think, ‘Hey, maybe I would rather live down here than sit an hour in traffic in Columbus,’” Hudson said.

Hudson has been the mayor of Wellston for about two years. He moved back to Wellston after being gone for almost 40 years and wanted to make an impact in the lives of the people living there.

“There are three legs to the stool of a successful community,” Hudson said. “The first is civic contribution groups. The other two are community government and the third being community schools.”

Hudson had been involved with a former mayor and classmates in a group to reinvigorate the downtown Wellston area. Because Hudson didn't have much experience with schools, he decided the other “leg” he could contribute to would be running for city council in 2018. After being on council, he had conversations with the former mayor, who was ready to step down from the position and endorsed Hudson for mayor.

“This was kind of a legacy thing for me, trying to make the town I grew up in better than what I found it,” Hudson said.

Despite working on completing grants, Hudson said he has run into issues with government bureaucracy. He said he’s behind where he thought Wellston would be, and coming from the business world, he said he is used to things getting done more quickly.

Before being mayor and semi-retiring, Hudson ran more than 140 pizza stores as part of his 40 years of business experience. In the business world, Hudson was able to make decisions and move quickly, which is a contrast to the slower government processes of being mayor, he said.

Hudson’s tenure as mayor has been ruled by the pandemic, and he had to navigate potent pandemic misinformation in the region. His biggest challenge during the pandemic was “trying to tell people this wasn’t a government plot, it was real, and we need to take precautions to not only save ourselves but to save our neighbors,” he said.

Hudson said the Mayors’ Partnership for Progress, supported by Ohio University’s Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service, was a huge asset during the pandemic and before.

“It’s actually been the single best thing that I’ve done as a mayor was join that group,” Hudson said.

During the early days of the pandemic, Hudson met with mayors once a week over Zoom calls to talk, discussing topics such as how money given by the state and federal government could be distributed most effectively.

“It’s been invaluable. It should almost be a requirement for first-year mayors to join and have to go to these meetings,” Hudson said.

Although the pandemic has hit many regions hard economically, Hudson said General Mills actually increased production, which has kept the town doing well financially. For the social hit that the pandemic took on cities, Hudson said he’s been focused on getting people out for community events, especially when the Delta variant dies down.