If We Want a Future, We Have to Build It Ourselves

By Sam Howard

After Reviving Lewis County . . .

Back in February, the series Reviving Lewis County concluded. Dennis wrote the closing piece himself, and he was careful to say something I agreed with at the time: the series was never intended to promote a single project, industry, or proposal. It was meant to inform, not to sell. Over six weeks we talked about energy, transportation, workforce, and what manufacturers actually look for when they're deciding where to build. I stayed on that side of the line the whole way through, on purpose, because it was the right way to have that conversation.

Dennis closed it by saying the series concludes, but the conversation continues.

I'm back because the conversation isn't finished, and because I can no longer stay on the neutral side of that line. What I'm about to tell you has taken shape since those articles ended. I can tell you now where I stand, and I owe you the reason why.

First, Let Me Tell You Where I Stand

Before I take up any more of your time, here's the part I don't want anybody having to read to the bottom of the page to find.

On July 1, 2026, I bought 738 acres in the Carrs Bottom community, on Kentucky Route 8 between Vanceburg and Concord. I bought it with my own money, as a private investment. I am marketing it as hard as I know how to bring a job-creating industry to Lewis County.

Now the part that matters just as much, so everybody understands exactly what stage this is at. I have started aggressively marketing and promoting that site to every industry it fits, and that includes the power generation industry. That work is underway right now, and it is the honest description of where things stand. Anything you hear beyond that is running out ahead of the facts, and it didn't come from me. When there is something real to announce, I will announce it here, in plain language, and you will hear it from me.

I'll also say plainly what this is not. This is not an announcement from the Fiscal Court, from the City of Vanceburg, or from any economic development agency or authority. Nobody appointed me to do this, and nobody is paying me to write this.

This is one man from Lewis County, spending his own money on a piece of Lewis County ground, telling his neighbors what he's doing and why. If you disagree with me, you're disagreeing with me. Not with your county government.

What I want out of it isn't complicated, and it isn't tied to any one industry: jobs that pay a living wage, investment that shows up on our tax rolls, and a reason for our young people to stay. What kind of company brings that matters a lot less to me than whether one ever does.

The rest of this is why I believe it can happen here.

I Grew Up in a House That Came Off a Train

Not metaphorically. My mom and dad have lived in the same home for more than fifty years. It was one of the original Sears & Roebuck homes, ordered out of a catalog in the early 1900s, shipped in by rail car, and put together here in Lewis County. My dad was born in 1934, my mom in 1940, both in Lewis County and within six miles of where they live now. I have lived all 63 years of my life in this county, and after I left home, I've only lived in three different houses.

I tell you that because everything I'm about to say comes from somebody who has never once considered leaving. I'm not writing this from the sidelines.

What We Built, and Where It Went

For the better part of a century, Lewis County has helped make other people rich. I don't say that with any bitterness. I say it because it's true, and because it's the plainest way I know to explain what's standing in front of us right now. This isn't a county that's ever been afraid of work. It's a county that has worked itself half to death for a hundred years and watched almost none of what it built stay home.

Here's something most people here have never stopped to think about. Lewis County is big. At 483 square miles, we're larger than every single county that touches us. Bigger than Greenup, Carter, Rowan, Fleming, and Mason. Put all five of those counties' populations together and you get well over 100,000 people. Put us next to any one of them by ourselves and we're the smallest by a wide margin, at about 12,900 and still falling, spread across more ground than any of them.

That's not something to be ashamed of. It's what happens to a rural county whose land was always worth more to somebody else than it was ever developed for itself. We have never lacked for space. What we've lacked is a reason for people to stay in it.

And people haven't stayed. Kentucky grew 3.8 percent between the 2010 and 2020 censuses, adding more than 166,000 residents. Lewis County went the other direction, part of a pattern that hit Appalachian Kentucky harder than almost anywhere else in the state. We're smaller today than we were twenty-five years ago, in a state whose population is the largest it has ever been. The land didn't get smaller. We did.

Start with the railroads. The C&O, later Chessie, later CSX, ran a railcar repair and building shop at Raceland that at its peak employed more than two thousand people. Our people built hopper cars from raw steel on an assembly line there. Real fabrication, real trade skill, start to finish. Next to it sat a rail yard among the largest anywhere in the world, holding ten thousand cars at once, with an automated hump sorting thousands of Appalachian coal hoppers every single day to fuel the rest of the country.

Sixty miles northwest in Portsmouth, the Norfolk & Western yard did the same work on a bigger scale still. Five miles long, a hundred and twenty tracks wide at its widest point, more than 2,500 people on the payroll, moving coal out of West Virginia and Kentucky to Columbus and Cincinnati and points beyond, every day.

In Ashland, the old ARMCO plant, later AK Steel, was developed in the early 1920s and eventually employed about 7,500 people at its peak. Starting in 2011 they shuttered the coke plant, and the long unwinding began.

In Vanceburg, right here at home, a group of local businessmen built a two-story shoe factory in 1924 and used it to lure a Cincinnati footwear company to town. It worked. L.V. Marks and Sons ran the plant starting in 1926, and it grew into one of the region's main employers, carrying this community through the Depression.

Eventually U.S. Shoe took it over and made it a core plant for brands like Easy Spirit. In 1995, Nine West bought the footwear division of U.S. Shoe for $560 million. Real corporate money, real confidence in the operation.

Thirty minutes west, Browning Manufacturing in Maysville was once one of the region's largest employers, making industrial belts, pulleys, and gears. And underneath all of it, across tens of thousands of acres of family farmland here, burley tobacco once made up more than half of all farm receipts in Lewis County.

Every one of those places pulled something valuable out of the ground or out of these hands and shipped it somewhere else to become somebody else's fortune. That was always the deal. We produced. Somebody else profited. For a long time, at least there were paychecks in it. Then, one at a time, even the paychecks stopped.

The Bleed-Out

It didn't happen all at once. That's what made it worse.

In 2010, CSX stopped rebuilding coal cars at Raceland and furloughed 125 workers as its coal fleet modernization wound down. A small workforce remained, and Progress Rail continued operations there for several more years before announcing the shop's closure in 2019. Years of watching something our people had built their lives around fade a little more at a time. The Portsmouth yard, once 2,500 strong, runs today with a fraction of that workforce.

The ARMCO blast furnace went idle in 2015. The last piece still running shut down in 2019. The plant has since been demolished. Flattened. Gone.

The Vanceburg shoe plant closed in 1999, and it hit the way these things always hit. Hundreds of stable manufacturing jobs gone at once. Unemployment spiking. Families packing up to find work somewhere else. The storefronts along Main and Second going dark, one by one, as the payroll that had kept them open simply stopped existing.

Browning was downsized slowly through the early 2000s. A little here, a little there, nothing dramatic enough to fight. By the end of 2013, manufacturing at its Maysville operations had ended, with work moved to Mexico and elsewhere in the US.

Tobacco went the same way. Lewis County tobacco sales came to about $693,000 in 2022, a small fraction of what they had been a few years before, on top of buyout years that had already gutted burley farming across eastern Kentucky. The land didn't go anywhere. The buyers who let a family make a living on a few dozen acres did.

My dad retired from CSX at the Raceland yard. My wife Julee's dad retired from Browning in Maysville. Both drove nearly an hour each way, every single day, to jobs that don't exist here anymore. They did everything right. They showed up, they worked, they raised families on it, they retired with dignity. And there is nothing left for the next generation to walk into behind them.

Our farms tell the same story from another angle. In 1978, the average farm operator in Lewis County was 50.2 years old and nearly 17 percent were under 35. By 2022, the average age was 56.8, and about 9 percent of producers were under 35. More than a third of everybody still farming here is 65 or older. We still have 489 farms and over 123,000 acres of farmland. The land is still here. The generation that should be taking it over is not.

Railroads. Steel. Shoes. Belts and pulleys. Tobacco. Five industries, five decades, and every one ends the same way. The work leaves, or the workers age out, and nothing steps in behind it.

What It's Costing Us Right Now

Here's where it shows up today, in numbers you can check for yourself.

In July 2026, Lewis County's unemployment rate stood at 9 percent, the third-highest in the Commonwealth. The average weekly wage here was $827 in the first quarter of 2026. The Kentucky average was $1,248. The national average was $1,654. And 3,274 Lewis County residents drive outside the county every day to go to work.

We are not just behind. We are behind by a margin that compounds every single week a family cashes a paycheck.

That gap is exactly why we can't keep a childcare center open here. It isn't that nobody wants one. Quality childcare depends on enough working parents earning enough to pay for it, and when unemployment is this high and wages are this low, that math doesn't work. So the cycle feeds itself. Unaffordable childcare makes it harder for a parent to take a better job or a second one, and families who can't make it work here leave for someplace that has both the jobs and the services that come with them.

That's not a policy paper. That's the young family we all know that just left.

A New Wave, Thirty Miles From Our County Line

I'm not asking you to imagine some future boom, the way I had to imagine it back in 2018. It's already landing all around us, right now, while we watch it from the outside.

About thirty miles away at EastPark Industrial Park, a regional development involving Boyd, Carter, Elliott, Greenup, and Lawrence counties, TeraWulf bought a site on the Greenup-Boyd county line to build what they're calling the Muskie Data Campus. The company has secured one gigawatt of electric service for the campus and says it could eventually expand to as much as two gigawatts. That same company signed a long-term lease at the shuttered Century Aluminum plant in Hawesville with Anthropic, the company behind the Claude AI system.

In Mason County, the same county that lost Browning's manufacturing jobs, 2,080 acres have been rezoned for an unnamed Fortune 50 technology company's data center campus. Six buildings, up to 2.2 gigawatts. A 42-mile natural gas pipeline expansion, costing a little over $400 million, is working through federal review right now to help supply the EKPC Spurlock generating station. That pipeline is also part of what would allow Spurlock to continue operating while converting units to burn a combination of coal and natural gas.

Across the river at Piketon, Ohio, on the old Portsmouth uranium enrichment site, SoftBank is developing a power and data campus with published capital figures in the range of $33 billion. Not far away in Meigs County, Elementl Power is planning up to 1.5 gigawatts of nuclear generation on the Ohio River. At Franklin Furnace in Scioto County, Google has broken ground on Project Dazzler, a $1 billion, 500,000-square-foot data center on nearly 800 acres, with AEP building a new substation to serve it. And down at Paducah, on another old federal enrichment site, more than $100 billion in private investment has been announced for a hyperscale data center and energy campus.

In Adams County, Ohio, the old Killen and Stuart coal plants, closed since 2018 and taking hundreds of jobs and millions in school funding with them, are now being marketed to developers for the next generation of energy and industrial development. That one ought to sound familiar.

Every one of those sits on land that used to run on coal, or steel, or uranium enrichment for the last energy race this country ran. The wave went out on all of it. Now it's coming back in, carrying more money than most of us have ever seen attached to this region, and so far Lewis County has watched every one of those deals land somewhere else.

Those projects belong to other people, in other counties. I list them because they tell you where the money in this region is going, and how fast.

I'm also not here to argue whether nuclear power or AI data centers are good or bad for the world. That argument will keep going long after this piece is forgotten, and it isn't mine to settle. What I'm telling you is simpler. It doesn't much matter what any of us think, because it's already here. It's funded. It's under construction or being developed thirty miles away in nearly every direction.

The only question left for Lewis County is whether we're at the table when the next one gets decided, or whether we read about it in this paper again.

On the facing page: The Ground at Carrs, what eight years of getting it ready actually involved, and what I'm asking of you.

The Ground at Carrs

By Sam Howard

Who Am I to Say Any of This?

I graduated from Lewis County High School in 1980. Before I started college that fall, I worked at a sawmill off-bearing oak slabs that weighed more than I did, for $2.65 an hour. I started at Morehead State and withdrew less than two months later. I knew college wasn't my path, and I knew I wanted to work with my hands and be my own boss someday.

At twelve I rode a bicycle six miles to mow an aunt's yard, spent two and a half hours mowing it, rode six miles home, and got paid five dollars. I picked rocks up out of a farmer's hayfield for fifty cents an hour. I drove a dump truck for the county road department. I worked at an asphalt plant. I spent years traveling the East Coast building high-voltage transmission lines, and I helped pull wire on the 765-kilovolt line that crosses the Ohio River in Greenup County and runs on into Indiana, the same line now being counted on to power the data centers going up all around us. I worked for a telephone contractor out of French Lick, Indiana, changing out poles in this county. I've stood on a wood pole four hours straight without coming down. I spent nearly ten years on the road for a regional general contractor.

In November 1992 I was thirty years old, married, with a three-year-old daughter and a nine-month-old daughter. I'd just finished building a house and moved in the week of Thanksgiving. I'd been working close to homet for almost two years straight, and late that year I learned I was about to start traveling again.

I'd always wanted to work for myself. So instead of becoming a road warrior again, I decided to start my own company so I could stay here in Lewis County with my family.

I started Trace Creek Construction on January 1, 1993, with five thousand dollars I'd kept back from finishing the house, and one employee. I didn't finish the brick on that house for another year. The money went into the company instead of onto the wall.

I'm the oldest of six children. There are more than fifty direct descendants of my mom and dad now, and every one of them is still living.

Today I'm CEO of Trace Creek Construction and I serve as a member of several other companies. I've spent more than forty years building things for other people. This next part I've spent eight years building on my own.

One of the Best Sites Left on the River

There's a piece of ground in the Carrs Bottom community, on Kentucky Route 8 between Vanceburg and Concord, that I believe is one of the best undeveloped industrial sites left on the Ohio River.

Not the best in Lewis County. On the river.

It's 738 acres, essentially all of it developable, which is rare in country like ours. It has about two miles of Ohio River frontage, meaning barge access for the kind of heavy freight that can't move economically any other way. A CSX mainline runs through the property. That's Class I rail, already there, not something that has to be built. A 765-kilovolt transmission line runs within about a half mile, the largest class of transmission line in the country and the single hardest thing on this list to go out and get if a site doesn't already have it.

It sits less than six miles from the AA Highway, which puts a truck on four-lane road in minutes and in Ashland, Maysville, or northern Kentucky in about an hour. And there's no full-time residents within a mile and a half of the center of the property, which matters more than people realize when a company is weighing where it can build without putting itself on top of its neighbors.

Kentucky Power selected Carrs nearly fifty years ago as the preferred site for a proposed 2.6-million-kilowatt coal-fired generating plant. That plant was never built. Decades later, AEP again considered Carrs for a major generating facility, this time an integrated gasification combined cycle plant.

I've held options to purchase the property since 2018.

For those eight years, on my own time and my own dime, I've worked that site. I've been to Florida, to Colorado, to Vermont, and a lot of places in between, marketing it as one of the best industrial development opportunities in the eastern United States. Over those years, the Commonwealth of Kentucky and I have between us completed the due diligence serious prospects require before they'll even take a meeting: contour surveys, archaeological reports, geotechnical studies, wetlands delineation, endangered species reports, and more. There have been dozens of inquiries and onsite visits.

That's the unglamorous part, done quietly and without much fanfare, and it's what turns a promising piece of ground into a site a real company can say yes to in months instead of years. Most rural sites lose out not because they're bad sites, but because they can't answer questions fast enough.

That is one of the biggest reasons I bought it.

I'll be straight about what it doesn't have, too. A project of any real size at Carrs would need water and wastewater capacity built to it, road improvements, and a serious amount of site work. And anything built there would go through state and federal permitting, with public notice and public comment, the same as anywhere else.

Nobody sneaks a plant onto the Ohio River.

Where This Stands Today

I bought the property on July 1, 2026, and until now I hadn't said so publicly. I'm saying it because I believe this site could shape Lewis County's next fifty years the way that power plant might have shaped the last fifty, if it had ever been built. And because the people who live here ought to hear it from me, in plain language, before they hear it any other way.

Let me be just as plain about where this stands today, because I want everybody putting this paper down with the same understanding.

The site is partially prepared, and it is being marketed hard, right now. I have started aggressively marketing and promoting Carrs to every industry that fits a piece of ground like this one, and that includes the power generation industry.

That effort is active, it is broad, and it is the whole of what I can tell you today.

What I have to show for it is a ready site, a list of prospects, and one stubborn local owner who is out working it. When a company decides to put its name on this ground, you will read it in this paper, and you will hear it from me.

For eight years I've marketed that ground to the major industries that need rail and river access. Now I'm going after all of them at once, and going after them harder than I ever have. That includes the power generation industry, because power is what's actually being built up and down this stretch of the Ohio River Valley right now, and going where the buyers already are is common sense in any business.

Power generation is one strong prospect on a long list, and I'm working the whole list.

It could just as easily be a company that supplies the nuclear industry rather than one that generates power. Heavy manufacturing. Forging. Grain or fertilizer handling off the river. Something that makes a component we currently buy from overseas. A rail-to-barge terminal. The list of industries that want two miles of river, a Class I railroad, and 765-kilovolt power within a half mile is a long one, and I am promoting this site to all of them.

Landing the first real employer is the hard part. Once one does, others tend to follow.

I'm not asking anybody here to form an opinion on nuclear power or artificial intelligence. I don't have one to hand you. What I want is jobs here.

The point is that there are companies with billions of dollars to spend deciding right now where in this region that money lands. I'd like some of it to land here.

The Choice Is in Front of Us

I have two daughters, two sons-in-law, and nine grandchildren, and every one of them lives in this county today. I want them to have the chance to stay.

We've watched this happen five times now. We lost the shoe plant. We lost the railroad jobs. We lost Browning. We lost the steel mill. We lost tobacco. Every time the answer was the same. Young people left for Cincinnati, for Lexington, for Columbus, for wherever the work had gone, and the ones who stayed got older with nobody coming up behind them, on our farms and in our workforce alike.

Waiting and hoping has been tried here, thoroughly, for fifty years. We know what it produces.

We have plenty of land in this county. Putting a small piece of it to work for industry and jobs isn't reckless. It's about the most practical thing we could do. And better-paying jobs don't only help the families who take them. They hold up the local businesses, the child-care centers, the storefronts sitting empty on Main Street, the whole ecosystem that can't survive on an $827 average weekly wage and 9 percent unemployment no matter how hard a family works.

I know some people, some who live here and some who don't, would rather nothing change at all. I understand that instinct better than you might think. Change is uncomfortable, and this county and this region have been burned by outside companies before. Anybody who watched a plant get shipped somewhere else has earned the right to be skeptical of the next outfit that shows up with a nice brochure.

So here's what I'd rather do.

Have that argument out in the open now, while there's still time for it to change anything, instead of the first time we get it after a company has already picked somewhere else. Ask me the hard questions. Ask about water. Ask about traffic on Route 8. Ask what happens to the view from the river. Ask what a company like that would actually pay in taxes, and who gets hired.

I'd rather answer a hundred hard questions from my neighbors than land a project nobody here wanted.

And I'm not asking you to trust a stranger with this county's future. I've picked up rocks here. I've worked timber here. I've built power lines, and I've built projects worth more than a hundred million dollars. I bet my own family's roof on an unfinished brick wall to build something that was mine. I've spent eight years and my own money getting a piece of this county ready, with no guarantee anything would ever come of it.

Guarantees are hard to come by in this business, for me or for anybody else in it.

What I have is a site that's finally ready, sitting in the middle of the largest wave of industrial investment this river valley has seen in my lifetime, and I am out selling it every week. Which project lands here is still being decided, and that decision is being made right now, somewhere.

I do know we only get looked at if we're ready, and for the first time, we are.

The next watershed moment for Lewis County can be another loss, the way the last one was. Or it can be the one where, for the first time in a hundred years, some of the wealth this county helps create actually stays here. In the wages. In the schools. In the grandkids who get to grow up down the road from where their grandparents did.

That choice is still ours to make. I don't intend to let it pass us by twice.

Dennis ended the series in February by saying it concludes, but the conversation continues. I held onto that line for six months before I knew the why.

And now you know.

The conversation is not over. It's just gotten a lot more real, and I'm ready to have it.

About the author

Sam Howard is CEO of Trace Creek Construction and a lifelong resident of Lewis County. He is the author of Reviving Lewis County, a six-part series that ran in the Herald earlier this year. The Carrs Bottom property described here is his own private investment. Howard has paid the publication cost associated with this special two-page commentary. The views expressed are his own and are not offered on behalf of Lewis County Fiscal Court, the City of Vanceburg, or any economic development agency or authority. The full Reviving Lewis County series is available at https://lewiscountyherald.com/reviving-lewis-county-series

Editor's Note:

This special two-part commentary continues the conversation begun earlier this year in *Reviving Lewis County*, a guest series authored by Sam Howard and published by *The Lewis County Herald* as a forum for examining ideas and opportunities related to Lewis County's future. Howard is the author of these articles, and the views expressed are his own. I have collaborated with Sam in their presentation for *Herald* readers and in reviewing factual information for accuracy and currency.

Sam and I are lifelong friends, and I have confidence in his commitment to Lewis County and in the value of an open discussion about our county's future. As disclosed in these articles, Howard now owns the Carrs Bottom property discussed in this special commentary. Howard is also paying the publication cost associated with this two-page presentation. That arrangement applies only to this commentary and has no connection to *The Herald's* independent news coverage of the Carrs property or any potential development there.

— Dennis Brown