

Sturbridge Tornado Impact Summary

June 10, 2011

Background

On Wednesday, June 1, 2011 at approximately 5:15pm a tornado cut a devastating path of destruction as it churned its way through Sturbridge.

The twister travelled from border to border along a course running just south of Main Street (state Rt. 20) and crossing over portions of Streeter Rd., Holland Rd., the Old Sturbridge Village access road, Stallion Hill Rd., Interstate 84, Haynes Rd. (Route 15), back over Main Street (state Rt. 131), Farquhar Rd., Willard Rd., Fiske Hill Rd. and into Southbridge over the airport before retreating back to the sky near Rt. 169.

The result was a quarter- to half-mile wide swath of damage that will scar the earth for decades.

Sturbridge endured a massive amount of felled trees, seriously damaged residential and commercial structures, and loss of power, telephone, cable and internet service in the impacted neighborhoods. Substantial damage was also incurred on public property.

Response and Impact

While Sturbridge Police, Fire and DPW personnel responded immediately to the affected areas to assist citizens, the Town's primary transportation routes, including Main Street (comprised of state Route 131 and state Route 20), were severed for 24 to 72 hours due to the volume of debris. Emergency personnel did not access the Streeter Road neighborhood until 16 hours after the event.

Following the first tornado, a temporary shelter was established at Tantasqua Regional High School for about 30 families. A secondary temporary shelter was established at the Public Safety Complex at approximately 7:30 p.m. when a second line of storms (and an additional, unconfirmed tornado) struck the Town during bus transports to the high school shelter.

Later, other law enforcement jurisdictions assisted the Town with traffic control while MassDOT and MEMA tree crews helped open up access for utility crews that worked to restore power. Many private citizens had already been utilizing chain saws to cut through the mass of timber to assist their neighbors.

Nearly half of the Town was left without power after the storm. Up to 36 hours after the storm 25 percent of the Town was still without power. By early evening on June 3, power was restored to nearly the entire community (nearly 48 hours after the tornado). Residents reported substantial losses of perishable food items as a result of the outages.

The twister also damaged public property.

The entire security perimeter and access to the Stallion Hill Water Tank, the Sturbridge Cooperative Nursery School building on Main Street, the recreation fields by the Dept. of Public Works headquarters, the recreation department storage sheds and equipment, and the access road, perimeter and electrical system at Well #3 all suffered damage primarily from wind or falling trees.

Many secondary roads and access ways were choked with debris limiting assessment and clean-up efforts. Some as of this writing are just now being opened up by heavy equipment.

Currently, federal and state emergency management teams, assisted by the Fire Chief, Building Inspector and Principal Assessor, continue to survey and assess the damages for purposes of a potential federal disaster declaration.

Unmet Needs

The primary needs of Sturbridge are:

- seeking all available assistance for the dozens of private homeowners and businesses devastated by the tornado,
- collecting and disposing of the massive amounts of debris scattered throughout the impacted areas of town, and
- seeking federal and state assistance to cover the astronomical costs (estimated at \$500,000 as of June 7 and upwards of \$1,000,000 additional costs for the debris management plan)

There are dozens of private homes damaged and many elderly property owners that are overwhelmed by the seemingly insurmountable task of digging out. To assist, the Town has established a Volunteer Resource Center as a clearinghouse and coordination point for all offers of donated services and requests for assistance.

Financial Costs

The prevalent need in the community is to collect and dispose of thousands of cubic yards of debris. Whole trees, massive limbs, and all manner of construction and demolition debris is scattered throughout the neighborhoods in the path of the tornado. And, the volunteer efforts and resources are not sufficient to deal with the volume.

Failure to remove these materials will result in increases to the rodent population, infestation from insects, and safety concerns for children or others passing by or through damaged areas.

The Town has outlined a debris management plan that will facilitate removal of the bulk of debris over the next 30 days. Yet, there is no means yet identified to fully cover these costs which are preliminarily estimated to total at least \$1.5 million.

To raise the required funds, the Town has taken the following actions:

1. The Town Administrator and Finance Director continue to scour all department budgets for any available year-end balances. This effort has only identified approximately \$75,000 which is not even sufficient for the initial response overtime and road clearing efforts.
2. The Board of Selectmen voted earlier this week to establish the "Tornado Relief Fund" specifically for debris management. Funds collected to date are less than \$1,000 as folks are overwhelmed and seeking to donate funds and goods privately.
3. The Board of Selectmen also voted to authorize the Town Administrator and Finance Director to initiate the deficit spending process in accordance with state law to help raise funds immediately. This process only serves to "kick the can down the road" to next fiscal year which begins on July 1st. The Town just set its FY12 budget on June 6 within available revenues.
4. The Board of Selectmen will likely set a date for a Special Town Meeting in July to make budget adjustments and allocate any available funds towards the cleanup. Given that state aid to municipalities has declined the past four fiscal years, the Town's total emergency reserves of \$1 million would need to be totally decimated and would still be insufficient for the costs.

In addition to the \$1.5 million estimate for the initial debris efforts above, the Town continues to incur ongoing daily operational needs of public safety personnel to limit looters and "gawkers", public works personnel to continue to provide access and open up use for Town-owned lands, and continuing tree removal efforts. These daily costs can run from \$5,000 to \$8,000 per day.

In short, the costs of simply managing the impacts of the tornado threaten to overwhelm the ability of local residents to bear the cost absent federal and state assistance. Without help, the Town will fully deplete its emergency reserves, may need to cut other important services, will jeopardize the Town's bond rating (which in-turn drives up debt service costs), and will generally lead to a "domino effect" of unfavorable impacts to the community-at-large.

The Town of Sturbridge desperately requires intervention and assistance through a federal disaster declaration for both public and private assets, and/or through federal or state direct forms of assistance to deal with the debris from the storm.

The Town has no choice but to move forward with cleanup and respectfully requests that the federal and state government join us as partners in this effort.