

Wind-Blown City Rallies to Recover From Tornado



By DOMENIC SARNO



City emergency responders survey the damage after a tornado ripped through downtown Springfield last June 1.

© 2011 THE REPUBLICAN COMPANY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. USED WITH PERMISSION.

No one could have predicted that an EF3 tornado would hit the city of Springfield on June 1, 2011, a day that will remain etched in the memories of residents. The tornado cut a swath a quarter-mile wide in some locations and left a path of destruction stretching 6.2 miles from our downtown business community through seven city neighborhoods, damaging more than 600 structures citywide. The emergency resulted in a Federal Disaster Declaration being signed by President Barack Obama on June 15, 2011.

The city's response to the tornado was nothing short of remarkable. Immediately, we established command center posts and mobilized first responders. Community members also jumped into action, as the city saw an extraordinary level of volunteerism and neighbors caring for neighbors.

The first priority was clearing streets, restoring utilities, and ensuring that neighbors were safe. The Red Cross, working with the city, established an emergency shelter at the MassMutual Center immediately after the tornado. The shelter served about 350 residents at that time. A housing triage effort took place at the shelter, assisting people to secure new permanent housing. When the shelter finally closed on June 28, a small number of remaining families needed to be transitioned to motels as they continued to search for housing.

A total of 320 renter households were displaced by the tornado; most of them have provided information indicating that they have moved into new permanent housing or back into repaired housing. Housing caseworkers collected new addresses for people who relocated after being displaced, and this information was forwarded to the Springfield Public Schools. During the month of August, school staff reached out to families with children to ensure that they were registered for school and had school transportation plans in place. Of the people who provided new addresses, 89 percent relocated within Springfield, 10 percent moved to surrounding towns in Hampden County, and 1 percent moved out of the area.

Rebuilding Efforts

An intense level of work continued throughout the summer. Crews removed nearly 150,000 cubic yards of vegetation and structural debris from public ways. More than 2,000 public-way trees had to be removed, and 3,381 trees were damaged in city parks. Homeowners and businesses have taken out 2,700 construction permits, with a total value of more than \$13 million.

City officials hosted a series of neighborhood meetings to answer questions from residents and businesses and to provide information to those affected by the tornado. The open meetings were held in each of the affected neighborhoods. The city's communication director and a mayoral aide produced an English and Spanish version of a Citizen's Assistance Guide that was disseminated by volunteers and community groups to residents in the hardest-hit areas, where many were without

Domenic Sarno has been the Mayor of Springfield since 2008.

WIND-BLOWN CITY RALLIES TO RECOVER FROM TORNADO

electricity and phone service for days after the tornado. The assistance guide contained important information about shelters and feeding stations as well as important contact information.

The city teamed up with a nonprofit to create a Rebuilding Guide for Homeowners to help residents access resources they needed. The guide provides detailed information about insurance claims, Federal Emergency Management Agency assistance and Small Business Administration loans, undertaking construction and working with city agencies, and incentives and information for green building, healthy homes, handicapped accessibility, and historic preservation. The guide also tells individuals where to go for help navigating the system. DevelopSpringfield generously supported production of this guide.

The Springfield Water and Sewer Commission offered free water and sewer services until June 30, 2012, for homeowners who placed a trailer on their lot for use as temporary housing. Turn-on and shut-off fees incurred during the rebuilding period for tornado-damaged homes were also waived.

A public-private partnership of the Springfield Redevelopment Authority and DevelopSpringfield was established by late June.

By the Numbers: June 1 Tornado Outbreak

Number of tornadoes: 6 confirmed

Time from beginning of first tornado to end of last tornado: 3 hours, 22 minutes (3:35–6:57 p.m.)

Maximum-rated tornado: EF3 (winds of 136–165 mph)

Path of strongest tornado: 39 miles

Maximum width of path: ½ mile

Fatalities: 3

Injuries: 200-plus

Damage: \$140 million-plus

Power outages: 48,000-plus

People placed in temporary shelters: 480

Communities hit by tornadoes: 11 (Agawam, Brimfield, Charlton, Monson, Oxford, Southbridge, Springfield, Sturbridge, Westfield, Wilbraham, and West Springfield)

– John Ouellette

Sources: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Weather Service, National Climatic Data Center, news reports



Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno (right) points out the path of the tornado for state Housing and Economic Development Secretary Gregory Bialecki while touring Main Street on June 6.

The two agencies were tapped to plan and manage a comprehensive multi-year effort to rebuild all sections of the city affected by the tornado. Two local executives were loaned by their respective employers on a temporary basis to assist in the rebuilding effort. Gerald Hayes of Westfield State University has been loaned to the SRA, and Nicholas Fyntrilakis of Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company has been loaned to DevelopSpringfield. They are leading the initial phase of the planning and rebuilding effort and helping to build long-term capacity.

The Rebuild Springfield Advisory Committee was appointed in July and charged with providing advice on the formation of a Tornado Rebuilding Master Plan, the formation of an implementation strategy for the plan, soliciting input from neighborhood councils, residents, business groups and the public at large, and emphasizing workable approaches that will achieve rebuilding on a timely basis and capitalize on the capabilities of existing local organizations and businesses. The advisory committee includes representatives from neighborhood councils, faith-based organizations, educational institutions, the business community, and housing agencies.

In September, DevelopSpringfield selected Concordia, LLC, to lead the development of a master plan for areas of the city affected by the tornado. Concordia will bring together a team of professionals, including Goody Clancy, BNIM, and Project for Public Spaces, as well as other resources as required. Concordia led the Unified New Orleans Plan after Hurricane Katrina, which included the selection and management of twelve national, regional and local planning firms that created plans for fourteen planning districts and an overall citywide recovery plan. Concordia managed engagement and public relations throughout the project.

© 2011 THE REPUBLICAN COMPANY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
USED WITH PERMISSION.



© 2011 THE REPUBLICAN COMPANY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. USED WITH PERMISSION.

Springfield police officers check the security of downtown businesses after the June 1 tornado.

Character Shines

Since June 1, the city has spent more than \$9.6 million, primarily related to debris removal and monitoring, site preparation work related to assembling portable classrooms, and overtime for the city's first responders. The total projected cost to the city due to the tornado is estimated at \$106 million. This number, which may yet change, represents all necessary work needed to bring the city back to its pre-tornado condition.

In response to the rising costs and possible delays in getting reimbursements from FEMA, I held a meeting with Nick Russo, FEMA's coordinating officer, to discuss the timeline for anticipated reimbursements when completed projects are submitted to FEMA. There are forty-two major projects that are being completed in collaboration with FEMA. These projects will take time to complete to make sure all eligible costs are reimbursed. City officials are currently working with FEMA on completing the most expensive projects first in order to ensure that the city's cash flow is not adversely affected.

The city's response to the devastating tornado has remained the top priority of my administration. We are fortunate to have the assistance of so many volunteers and volunteer organizations. As I toured all the areas affected by the tornado, I reassured residents and business owners that we would do whatever it takes to recover. Springfield has been blessed with the support of Governor Deval Patrick, Lieutenant Governor Tim Murray, Congressman Richard Neal, U.S. Senators John Kerry and Scott Brown, state legislators, the City Council, FEMA, and the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency, and we look forward to their ongoing assistance.

The city of Springfield will continue to focus on rebuilding infrastructure and assisting residents and businesses that have been affected. At a time of disaster, the true character of a city and its residents shines through, and I am proud of our citizens. 🌟

LESSONS LEARNED:

A Q&A With Springfield's Emergency Preparedness Director

Robert Hassett responded to questions from the Municipal Advocate last October.

Municipal Advocate: A tornado is truly an emergency that comes out of the blue, especially in New England. We don't have much experience with them here, but then again, we have to be prepared for anything.

Robert Hassett: Contrary to popular wisdom, a tornado is not such a rare occurrence in western Massachusetts. My research shows that there have been at least fifty tornados within twenty-five miles of Springfield since 1950. Statistically, Massachusetts has about the same frequency of tornados as Texas or Missouri, 1.1 tornados per 10,000 square miles. It's just that those states are much larger geographically and the population is much denser in Massachusetts, so tornados here have a higher probability of hitting an urban area.

Advocate: What portions of the city's emergency response plan were most effective during this particular emergency?

Hassett: Springfield uses a Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan that covers all hazards. For the city, this was a Level II disaster, meaning that the city had to reach out to the state and neighboring communities to help us manage the situation. Just about every component of the plan was used. It was similar in many ways to a response to a hurricane, except the damage was in a more concentrated 6.2-mile by quarter-mile path.

Springfield was incredibly fortunate not to sustain any loss of life, but forty-three persons were hospitalized and hundreds more received lesser injuries. Three individuals perished in the storm in adjacent communities.

The city mobilized in response to the storm in a systematic, deliberate manner, first to minimize the loss of life and injury through establishment of incident command, search and rescue, and casualty management, clearing of debris to open emergency routes, establishing mass care and

WIND-BLOWN CITY RALLIES TO RECOVER FROM TORNADO

LESSONS LEARNED

continued

sheltering, and then stabilizing the situation by shutting down utilities and evacuating and sometimes demolishing structures that were unsafe.

One consequence of the storm that was unexpected was the destruction of underground utilities. Springfield lost more than 3,000 street trees in neighborhoods. When those trees were uprooted, they brought up gas, water and underground power lines with them.

In the first two weeks following the storm, the city's emergency plans served it well as efforts were made to restore utilities, manage debris and assess damages to property and infrastructure.

Advocate: How did the city benefit from the most effective aspects of its emergency plan?

Hassett: Springfield had a remarkably successful response to the tornado. What served the city more than the emergency plan was the planning process, existing relationships with government, local industries and organizations, volunteer organizations and within city government itself. Leadership and genuine caring was the engine that powered the city through incredibly tough days and nights, and not just at the top. It was a team effort that just would not be deterred by obstacles. Power, gas and water were restored to 13,000 customers within seventy-two hours. Some 350 residents were sheltered until housing could be found for them. Fire trucks cruised the streets during all shifts along with Springfield police, state police, National Guard, and volunteer agencies to pass out needed items and to feed and help victims. Even with three schools damaged and out of service, classes continued to the end of the school year, accommodating all students, even those who had to be bused from the shelter. Prior investments in planning, training and exercises came back to pay off when Springfield really needed it.

Advocate: For what aspects of this emergency was the city not sufficiently well-prepared?

Hassett: Donations management and volunteer management were two aspects of the recovery for which Springfield had to ramp up quickly. When daylight broke the morning after the storm, volumes of donations and volunteers began to pour in—lots of donations of every kind and hundreds if not thousands of volunteers, some with skills, most who just wanted to help in some way. Springfield used the services of the United Way and the State 211 service to manage this enormous task. Within two days, the system had smoothed out and was processing huge volumes of requests.

Advocate: What aspects of the response had to be done “on-the-fly”?

Hassett: Communications were heavily impacted within the tornado zone. Landline phones, cable television and the Internet were inoperable. Our normal lifelines were gone. Springfield decided to use flyers, word of mouth, and community meetings to get the word out to affected populations on what was going on, how to get help, and who to turn to. Neighborhood organizations, faith-based organizations, and volunteers went door-to-door, and community gatherings were organized for multiple meetings in neighborhoods. These meetings, though less frequent, are still being held. The city also used press conferences and media releases to keep residents informed.

Advocate: In reviewing the city's response, how will the city modify its plans for the future in order to be better prepared?

Hassett: Springfield is evolving stronger from this incident, with some significant changes with regard to planning for coordinating volunteers and donations. In addition, planning for additional mental health assistance for families and children affected by the trauma of a disaster is needed.

Advocate: What were the lessons learned from this emergency that could benefit Springfield (and other communities) in the future?

Hassett: One significant impediment to recovery efforts immediately following the storm was the swarm of curiosity seekers that came to gawk at the damage. In spite of the best efforts of local and state police and requests from the mayor to stay away, the crowds continued to flood the area to get a glimpse of the tornado damage. All this extra traffic on the perimeter of the tornado impact zone seriously impeded the work of utility restoration and disaster relief crews. The curiosity seekers also placed a heavy load on police trying to provide perimeter security to damaged homes and businesses.

Since the tornado, residents have experienced a severe microburst, an earthquake and a tropical storm. The unexpected consequence of the tornado disaster was that it elevated the level of family and business preparedness for future disasters. Significantly more people were prepared for the arrival and potential impacts of Tropical Storm Irene when it moved through the area in August. There is a greater general awareness of the potential for natural and technological disasters and their impacts that Springfield and surrounding communities will not let lapse.

Advocate: And finally, what are the continuing concerns (e.g., debris, loss of trees, homelessness, fire danger) several months afterward?

Hassett: New England weather doesn't give much [relief] when it comes to recovery, and as a result, much of the effort is currently focused on getting residences prepared for the winter weather. Temperatures have dropped markedly and snow and cold are on the way. The blue tarps on roofs are slowly starting to disappear and structures are being replaced. Most of the affected population has found permanent residence, and the business community, in most cases, has made a dramatic and strong comeback. 🌟

—John Ouellette