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Irene's major casualty: Vermont's mobile home parks

Posted By [Andrew Nemethy](#) On September 14, 2011 @ 10:55 pm In [Recent](#) | [2 Comments](#)



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Furnishings lay in mud outside a mobile home in the Weston mobile home park in Berlin. VTD/Josh Larkin

Piece by soiled and muddy piece, the cozy, comfortable lives of dozens of Vermonters were being disassembled Wednesday at the Weston Mobile Home Park in Berlin.

Chairs and tables. Couches and refrigerators, big-screen televisions and small end tables, throw rugs and oriental rugs, cleaning products, clocks, pots and pans, dining room chairs and kitchen utensils, radios and bicycles — all the things that make a home a home headed into the Dumpster, along with large piles of crumbled sheetrock, batts of pink fiberglass insulation, wooden framing studs and damaged siding and particleboard.

For some of the poorest and most vulnerable Vermonters, this is the scene some two weeks after Tropical Storm Irene swamped the state.

When your only home is your damaged mobile home

by Andrew Nemethy



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Bernie Corliss. VTD/Josh Larkin

Wearing dark shorts and a grey T-shirt with a day's worth of stubble, Bernie Corliss stands amidst the torn-apart chaos of his devastated mobile home in Berlin with a shellshocked look.

That's not surprising when you consider what he's been through.

First, he survived a harrowing boat rescue when the raging floodwaters of the Dog River poured in through the heating vents of his mobile home at Weston Trailer Park and he and his wife April discovered they had no way out.

"It was a pretty terrible experience. That scared me more than anything I've ever been through," he says, which saw him and his wife and four others cast adrift in a boat in the dark floodwaters. He ended up hanging on to a tree for dear life.

Now, the one-time mechanic with a very bad back spends his days dawn to dusk working at salvaging the new mobile home that an unforgiving tropical storm named Irene tried to take from him.

"We've got to get it fixed," he says simply.

He knows other residents around him have decided to leave, and still others may decide not to come back. In all, 70 homes out of 80 at the park were damaged in the flood. But he says he doesn't have that option. He can't afford to live anywhere else after investing over \$50,000 in the mobile home.

"For us it's a necessity, because of the money," he says.

Corliss invites two visitors inside to tour around inside. It is a depressing sight, and yet it is what he is dealing with.

"It's pretty stressful," he admits, adding fatalistically that it's just what he faces. "It's nobody's fault," he says.

In some rooms, the sheetrock has been cut up the walls a couple of feet to remove soggy insulation and lies in heaps on the floor. The water rose to a height of 18 inches, Corliss explains.

Faculty from Union 32 High School in East Montpelier pitched in last week to help clear debris and remove sheetrock, he says, and their effort lifted his spirits.

The carpets now have been ripped up to air out the particleboard floor, whose newer construction seems to have survived the floodwaters better than some older homes, he thinks.

His refrigerator — also new — is wrecked and sits askew in the middle of the kitchen. The stove will have to go, but while the heating ducts are filled with mud, the heating system itself seems to have survived, one small bit of good news. So is the fact he managed to get his small John Deere sit-down mower going again after some elaborate mechanical maneuvers.

Corliss, who has lived in the new home since 2006 and in the park for nine years, is "couching it" now with his wife, though he's going to have to find another place to crash soon.

"It's better than the BOR and cots," he quips, referring to emergency shelter set up in Barre after the storm hit Aug. 28.

Wednesday, Corliss was in considerable pain because he has three bad vertebrae in his back, and his legs felt numb after overdoing it on Monday.

"This isn't helping very much," he admits. He's trying to get a disability hearing moved up because of his difficult housing situation.

Like many, he didn't have flood insurance and won't get anything from his insurance company. FEMA inspectors have toured his home, and he's waiting to see what the agency may offer, but has already arranged for a contractor to come and gut the insides so he can move back in. He hopes to live in one room as he works to renovate the home before winter sets in.

Outside, his spacious porch, which floated up and was blocking his door, sits tumbled upside down where it was hauled out of the way by a friend. Amazingly, some flowers in the neat garden that adorned his house are still poking up out of the ground, and a hydrangea survived the flood, albeit a little bedraggled.

"It's amazing what survives and what doesn't," he says.

Corliss may well have been talking about himself.

"It's been quite an ordeal. It's nothing I'd want to do again," he says.

Irene played no favorites when it hit with devastating rains Aug. 28, damaging everything from elegant 200-year-old homes and tony inns to golf courses, town libraries, restaurants and businesses. But there is little doubt, state officials say, those who will struggle most to recover are the residents who lived in mobile home parks, often sited in some of the state's least desirable property — and all too often near a river.

The state has now tallied the numbers that lie behind the personal tragedies suffered by those who live in those parks, and they are grim: A total of 13 mobile home parks in the state sustained damage, affecting 203 homes out of 662 known lots, says Jennifer Hollar, deputy commissioner of the Department of Housing and Community Affairs.

Of those, she says, 141 homes are now considered beyond repair, but she says as mobile home owners confront the damage and deal with mold and other side effects of the floods, she expects that number to grow. In all, the state has estimated over 700 homes were damaged or destroyed, so the mobile homes comprise a significant part of the damaged housing.

"It's devastating," says Hollar, noting the flooding hit the low-income segment of Vermont's housing stock especially hard.

"It's one of the major sections of need. It's heartbreaking."

According to the Mobile Home Project of the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity, mobile home parks in Brattleboro, Woodstock, Braintree, Waterbury, Berlin, Athens and Duxbury all sustained significant damage.

"A lot of folks are reeling a bit," says Shaun Gilpin, director of the Mobile Home Project, an advocacy, outreach and education program.

He says it's hard to tell at this point how many residents will abandon their homes, and equally hard to tell where they will go.

"The housing market in Vermont is one that has a very low vacancy rate," he says. "Mobile homes are an incredibly important part of housing in the state," he says.

Gilpin says stereotypes of mobile home residents "are generally unwarranted" based on his experiences. Many have jobs, as nurses or in construction, or are retired.

"Most of them did not choose to be in a flood zone. They chose to move where it's affordable," he says.

Among those charged with tallying the damage, there is no doubt Weston was one of the hardest hit.

Today it is a strange and somber ghost town, except for small beehives of activity where construction crews — actually deconstruction crews — are working to tear down and clear out mobile homes

whose owners have decided they're never coming back.

Once 80 families lived here. Now, along the U-shaped drive that they called home, blue and ochre and yellow mobile homes sit vacant, still displaying the gaily striped awnings or porches, American flags and flower boxes that marked stability and a sense of place. Amidst a sea of very green grass and soft mud, some homes have windows knocked out or tilted slightly askew, others appear hardly untouched, only the wrinkled siding or a dim mud line part way up the walls hinting at the fetid devastation that awaits inside.

Everywhere lie moldering piles of insulation and clothing and furniture and appliances, even whole porches and sheds, dumped helter-skelter in front of many homes.

Seventy homes in all were damaged, transformed in a few brief hours by the raging Dog River, which coursed through this park just off Route 12, a few miles south of the state capital.

Because water, power and sewer services were knocked out, the town of Berlin issued an emergency health order closing the park, and it remains mostly vacant except for the construction crew whose workers said they were taking out 20 homes.

Inside one home, Susan Paronto of Graniteville showed off the buckled and stained particleboard floor, once-handsome warping cupboards and the stained wallboard that mean this house in an area close to the river is beyond living in again.

"It's awful, it really is. You feel sorry for these people," she said.

The work can be awful, too. Inside the homes, a corrosive chemical taste attacks the throat, a subtle but pervasive stew of rot and mud and construction glues and building components. The worst can be the refrigerators, she says. In one home a fridge had been tipped over and the door accidentally opened when they lifted it out.

"Oh my God, what a stench," she recalls.

Outside, her husband, Jeffrey, pointed out the mud line part way up the siding that indicated how high the flood waters had risen.

"It's depressing. Lot of money in these," he said succinctly.

And a lot of money going out. Nearby, a big front-end loader took furniture and tipped it into a big Dumpster as another crew completely ripped apart a mobile home, including the siding, right down to the studs. A worker said each dumpster load would cost \$600-800.

Ellery Packard, who owns the park and bought it in 1994, says 70 homes of the 83 lots were damaged, and he guesses that 40 to 50 of the residents won't be coming back to live in the park.

"I know there's a lot leaving," he says, including one resident who had lived there for 44 years.

Packard was among those working at Weston today, trying to get the utilities working again. He said he has every intention of reopening.

According to Berlin Town Administrator Jeff Shulz, the town imposed a short-term emergency health order closing the park until utilities can be restored and environmental concerns can be addressed. He said he was "fairly certain" the town selectboard would lift that order in the next few weeks.



However, the longer term issue is addressing the location of the floodplain and base elevation data and whether any homes may have to be razed to meet zoning regulations in light of the flood.

"We're still sifting through these issues," he says. Packard was adamant the homes are above the floodplain. He was also irate that Green Mountain Power has been unable to say when it would restore power.

Hollar notes that it was not just residents who were hit hard by the flooding.

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Jeffrey Paronto of Graniteville points out the high water mark on the side of a mobile home in Berlin. VTD/Josh Larkin

"It's very difficult for the owners as well. In some cases, it's the income that supports the family," she says.

nonprofits and the rest privately owned, she says.

The mobile home parks damaged had a mix of ownerships: two were co-ops, two were

According to Hollar, FEMA will pay up to a maximum of \$30,200 to residents based on their damages, but FEMA's payments are not designed to make the mobile home owners whole.

Her department is now organizing meetings for those in the affected parks, bringing together FEMA, state agencies and local officials to answer questions residents may have about FEMA or loans or how state agencies can help. The department is also trying to identify places where residents could move by inventorying empty lots in other mobile home parks.

A key issue facing park owners, the residents and the state is whether it makes sense to reopen some of the flooded mobile home parks. On one hand, winter is coming and many residents are struggling to survive after the flood, she says. On the other hand, if the parks are in a flood-prone area, she asks, does it make sense "to put them in harm's way?"

2 Comments To "Irene's major casualty: Vermont's mobile home parks"

#1 Comment By [walter carpenter](#) On September 15, 2011 @ 12:50 am

Wow, great writing on an awful tragedy for what the people in Weston, and all the other trailer parks wiped out, went through. I know Bernie Corliss. Great mechanic. He kept some of my junk cars running and inspected:), back when he was at Routhier's. What a shame that this had to happen to him.

#2 Comment By [Jennifer Renko](#) On September 15, 2011 @ 9:35 am

Thanks for raising concern about the Weston trailer park. I saw on vtresponse.com Sunday morning that people would be working out there and that they needed bleach wipes and many other items. I took a box of bleach wipes out there in the morning and when I saw the devastation, my heart broke for the people who were affected by Irene. I gave my box of bleach wipes to an elderly man through tears and he thanked me heartily for my concern. I drove away knowing I had to go back. I've heard many others have also felt that way. I was able to organize a generous donation from a few other families of food and gift cards and my husband and I took this, along with dinner out to the clean up crews and residents on September 11. I talked as we sat and ate with the Weston residents and they were amazing. I heard things like "pay it forward" again and again. One man had just put his wife in a nursing home the week before and was truly feeling lost- I could see it in his eyes. Talking seemed to cheer him up, if but for a few moments. One couple gave me a huge zucchini in return for other items as they just couldn't take without giving back, even after having lost everything. The weary clean up crew ate, thanked me for a home-cooked meal, and I could feel that small things like this were making a difference for them. Having lost both of our cars in the May flooding, I know first hand the relief and poignancy of a kind, helping hand. Thanks to everyone who has been out doing the heavy lifting work of this flood relief and to the residents of Weston trailer park for their hope and strength in the face of utter destruction. I always remember that we are the measure not of our highest points in life, but our lowest.

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