

After Irene, Brattleboro Reexamines Housing Plans

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Brattleboro Housing Authority Director Chris Hart outside the Melrose Terrace. Hart says Tropical Storm Irene was a traumatic experience for many residents of the housing development.

(Host) Housing officials say Tropical Storm Irene has placed new pressures on an already tight supply of low income housing. The storm has prompted housing experts to re-evaluate their plans and priorities. That's especially true in Brattleboro, as VPR's Susan Keese reports.

(Hart) "So all of this was gone, where you're standing, was gone...and we had to build it back up... "

(Keese) Brattleboro Housing Authority Director Chris Hart leads the way through Melrose Terrace. The neighborhood of federally subsidized, single-story brick buildings was hit hard when the Whetstone Brook tore through it on August 28th.

(Hart) "It went all the way from here all the way to that orange snow fence."

(Keese) Hart notices a string of Christmas lights in one apartment window.

(Hart) "This is the building we just got back a few weeks ago, and it's been re-occupied."

(Keese) Other Melrose residents are still waiting to return. The project was home to 80 low-income seniors and people with disabilities. All were evacuated before Irene, along with residents of Hayes Court, another public housing project nearby. Both Hayes Court and Melrose are in the Whetstone Brook's flood plain - a fact that's gained new meaning since Irene. In this flood, Hayes Court escaped major damage while apartments at Melrose were devastated.

(Hart) "It was traumatic. People had to sift through their belongings and throw them away."

(Keese) But Hart says Melrose is the better built of the two developments, and it is still structurally sound. Before Irene, Hayes Court was slated to be torn down to make way for an assisted living complex. Hart says Hayes Court's tiny spaces are hard to retrofit for modern seniors, who expect to live independently much longer.

(Hart) "It also is two stories with no elevator. In terms of meeting any of the needs of an aging population. Hayes just doesn't make it at all."

(Keese) The developments were built in the 1960's and 70's through a federal Housing and Urban Development program that has since ended. The Brattleboro Housing Authority oversees five projects that are owned and subsidized by HUD. Rent is capped at a third of residents' income.

(Hart) "You can have no income and live in public housing."

(Keese) Hart says subsidies like that just aren't available in newer affordable housing. The financing has also changed, from direct government subsidies to a mix

of tax credit and non-profit partnerships. Gus Seelig directs the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. He says the philosophy has also changed.

(Seelig) "The model that came of age when public housing authorities were in vogue has really changed, primarily around the issue of trying not to concentrate low income households all in one place."

(Keese) Chris Hart says the proposed assisted living project at Hayes Court would have replaced 72 low income slots with fewer public housing units and a wider range of incomes. But that project is on hold. And while Hart has recently battled federal rules to restore the Melrose project, even though it's in a flood plain, she hopes the town will find ways to preserve the public housing that exists, and protect residents from future traumas, like Irene.

For VPR News, I'm Susan Keese.