

Mobile homes razed; officials laud a first step in resolving post-Irene, low-income housing issues

Andrew Nemethy | December 29, 2011



Patterson Park residents stand beside a bonfire being fed with the remains of mobile homes from the park. Photo by Gordon Miller.

MONTPELIER – A statewide effort to clean up widespread devastation at Vermont’s mobile home parks after tropical storm Irene was lauded Thursday for its remarkable partnerships, volunteers and accomplishments.

Lt. Gov. Phil Scott said the cleanup effort disposed of 68 badly damaged mobile homes in six parks around the state through a unique partnership of state, private and nonprofit organizations and a host of people who pitched in with time, money and equipment.

“I think that’s what I’m most proud of,” said Scott.

Vermonters from all walks of life just started “solving” the problems, as he put it, that cropped in the effort to remove mobile homes swamped by Irene.

More than \$300,000 was raised to assist the project through donations big and small, and in a race against the onset of winter, 68 units were demolished and removed in six weeks at an approximate cost of \$2,500 per unit, according to Scott.

Scott spearheaded the cleanup when it became apparent many mobile home owners did not have the \$3,500 to \$4,500 in funds to dispose of their homes – which meant recovery after the Aug. 28 disaster would be delayed since new units could not replace damaged ones, hard-

hit mobile park owners would be left without rental income for their lots, and valuable low-income housing sites would be removed from the state.

The lieutenant governor, who runs Dubois Construction a Montpelier company, used his contacts to pull in a wide array of expertise through the Associated General Contractors of Vermont to handle the disposal of the units. The project was launched in September with the help of Lawrence Miller, secretary of the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, and the Vermont Community Foundation, among other groups. The disposal project was launched in late September.

Officials first hoped to raise funding and through economies of scale to reduce disposal costs to around \$1,500 per unit. But by early fall it was clear even that amount was more than many could afford. Additional fundraising eventually meant the homes were disposed of at no cost to the residents of the mobile home parks, many of whom lost everything but received only minimal FEMA reimbursement – an average of \$4,500 according to figures from Scott's office.

Major donations of \$25,000 came from Aubuchon Hardware, \$50,000 from Bond Auto, \$60,000 from the Argosy Foundation and \$50,000 from a concert by the rock band Phish, along with many small contributions of \$10 and \$20.

Chris Graff, speaking for the Vermont Long Term Disaster Recovery Group, echoed Scott's comments about how the effort unfolded, saying as each problem came up, people "just took care of it."

"It was just remarkable," he said.

Miller described the legal and procedural aspects of disposing of the trailers under FEMA regulations as "nightmarish." The disposal was also complicated by the discovery that some of the homes had asbestos flooring.

All of those obstacles were surmounted, he said, and he offered special praise for Shaun Gilpin, who emerged as the go-to, on-the-ground dynamo as the head of the mobile home project for the Champlain Office of Economic Opportunity.

About 946 tons of waste and 105 tons of salvageable metal were removed during the project, Scott said.

Scott noted that River Run Park in Berlin, remains on the project list. A number of homes there were damaged in the spring floods remain. That could have also been the fate of parks hit by Irene in Berlin, Duxbury, Waterbury, Woodstock, Sharon and Brattleboro.

Graff said the removal of the damaged units was important to allow the parks to begin renovations and bring in new units. There continues to be a serious need for low-income housing. He said of some 1,500 homes damaged by Irene, 455 were mobile homes. (FEMA figures indicate 385 mobile home owners received some level of FEMA assistance and 141 were considered “substantially damaged.”)

According to Graff, an executive for National Life in Montpelier and like many others stepped in to help volunteer in the Irene recovery effort, the Vermont Disaster Relief Fund has around \$2 million in it but the estimated cost to repair all the damaged homes in Vermont is around \$10 million. He said no one has a comprehensive figure for how many people were displaced by Irene.

The future of some of the mobile home parks as low-income housing locations is uncertain since they are located in vulnerable floodplains. Weston Mobile Home Park owner Ellery Packard, whose Berlin site was inundated by the normally placid Dog River, said he had 70 units at the park before Irene. Ten now have mobile homes on them and another five are expected to be rented in spring, he said.

He said he has taken a big financial hit, but considering how many of his tenants lost everything, he said he didn’t want to mention just how much he’s spent. He said he had to go through Berlin’s zoning process and is elevating the mobile homes that are moving back into Weston, which is located on Route 12 south of Montpelier.

One of Packard’s former tenants, Sandy Gaffney, lost all she owned in the flood and was on hand Thursday to say she was “tickled pink” at the Thursday acknowledgement of all those who helped in the project.

“We just wanted to say thank you so much,” she said. Gaffney, helped organize a group called Mobile Home Residents for Equality and Fairness when it became clear mobile home owners were among the hardest hit by Irene.

Gaffney had praise for Packard as well, noting the owner of the Weston park had been working nonstop to restore it.

“They’ve been working night and day and that flood was not their fault,” she said.

Gaffney has found a small two-room efficiency in Montpelier and considers herself blessed to have obtained a federal Section 8 Housing Voucher made available after Irene to displaced Vermonters. That program caps rental payments based on income, making her rent affordable.

Like many of those whose homes the rivers took away, she's uncertain about whether she would move back to her former mobile home site, but one thing she's not uncertain of is that the state needs to address the severe housing crunch for low-income Vermonters.

"That's my goal – to make sure people don't forget," she said.