

IN THE WAKE OF THE STORM
by Senator Bob Smith

Hurricane Sandy was a disaster of epic proportions that left more than a quarter million New Jersey families without power, washed away streets, bridges, homes and businesses and destroyed entire towns. As Chairman of the Senate Environment and Energy Committee, I hosted meetings throughout the state and have been proactive in providing legislative remedies to assist residents in the rebuilding process. It is imperative that we continue to pass legislation that will protect homeowners, while preparing for the severe weather patterns of the future.

The Army Corp of Engineers, FEMA and the DEP are uniquely qualified to make these assessments, so that we can rebuild a better and stronger New Jersey. Sponsoring Senate Resolution 100, which passed the end of last session, urging the United States Army Corps of Engineers, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to conduct a thorough joint assessment of the damage in New Jersey caused by Hurricane Sandy, determining why damage was more severe in certain areas than others and providing an expert analysis of measures that may be pursued to protect infrastructure, the environment and the people of the state was a necessary step. The resolution requests the Army Corp of Engineers, FEMA and the DEP to provide the Governor and the Legislature with their findings.

Hurricane Sandy is one of the costliest natural disasters in U.S. history, with property damages approaching \$20 billion and the cost of lost business and revenue between \$10 billion and \$30 billion in New Jersey. An estimated 346,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, 116,000 people evacuated or displaced from their homes and hundreds of buildings, roads and bridges were washed away during and after the October 29, 2012 storm. Resolution S-100 was transmitted to Governor Christie; the Administrator of FEMA; the Region II Regional Administrator of FEMA; the Deputy Commanding General for Civil and Emergency Operations, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; the Commanding General and Chief of Engineers of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; President Obama; the Majority and Minority Leaders of the United States Senate; the Speaker and Minority Leader of the United States House of Representatives; and every member of Congress elected from New Jersey.

Here in Piscataway we are not strangers to the devastation caused by storms. During Hurricane Floyd (1999), which triggered the third largest evacuation in U.S. History; I sponsored the Emergency Disaster Relief Act and Local Flood Aid Act to aid economic recovery. It was this experience from Flood Floyd that led me to propose and pass into law the Disaster Relief Emergency Financing Program (P.L. 2013, Chapter 93) which expands the scope of what can be financed through the Environmental Infrastructure Trust. Following the passage of this law the Senate and General Assembly also passed my legislation to help residents to meet the new federal flood elevation standards. This law (P.L. 2013, c. 107) streamlines the process by providing automatic variances exempting homeowners elevating homes to FEMA/DEP standards.

With the conclusion of the 2012-13 Legislative Session, in mid-January and the new session beginning, many issues of paramount importance with regard Hurricane Sandy must be revisited. Many bills that were passed by both houses and ready to be signed into law were allowed to expire. The proper legislative term for this gubernatorial action is “pocket veto.” One such piece of legislation that I sponsored would have protected homeowners who are elevating their homes by requiring that any contractor offering home elevation services be registered with the state Division of Consumer Affairs and have proper experience and equipment. New Jersey has seen a surge of contractors entering the state and looking for a piece of the clean up action and repair market. Whether homeowners are raising their homes due to new FEMA standards or because they are protecting against future flooding and severe damage to their homes, they should be confident that their contractor is well-prepared for the job and is using the correct equipment.

Last session, the bill was approved unanimously by both houses, but was allowed to die by the administration as were other viable and important pieces of legislation aimed at helping our residents and local governments when they need it most. It is the beginning of a new legislative session and many of the measures that were allowed to die have been reintroduced. On February 27th the new home elevation contractor standards bill (S-942) was passed, again unanimously, 35-0 by the Senate and it now moves to the General Assembly.

Our job in the State Legislature is far from over with regard to storms. In order to learn from the past and prepare for the future, we must analyze the state’s strengths and weaknesses in terms of disaster preparedness and infrastructure and formulate a plan to ensure that this type of destruction never happens again. If you have any suggestions concerning New Jersey’s future resiliency to super storms please do not hesitate to contact my district office located here in town at (732) 752-0770.