

Lessons from the Storm: Case Studies on Economic Recovery and Resilience



Photo by Hermine Levey Weston

Southwestern Massachusetts: Strengthening Businesses and Communities through Disaster Recovery

A Disastrous Year

On June 1, 2011, a series of six tornadoes ripped through New England. The largest and most destructive tornado touched down in Western Massachusetts, moving through 11 communities in Hampden and Worcester Counties. Tornadoes are not uncommon in New England; the region averages eight per year.² However, few, if any, are as intense as the 2011 event. The twister caused three deaths and an estimated \$23.9 million in damages to uninsured buildings, roads, and infrastructure. It destroyed 319 homes and left an additional 600 homeowners with major structural damage to their property.³ The bulk of the destruction was in the City of Springfield, the City of West Springfield, and the Town of Monson.

The region was confronted with two more severe weather events in 2011: Tropical Storm Irene in August and a severe Nor'easter in October. While neither resulted in the same level of damage as the tornado, they increased the scale and urgency of the region's recovery efforts. The wind and rain from Tropical Storm Irene destroyed 84 homes, damaged an additional 289 residences, and caused \$25 million in road and bridge damage

This case study is part of a series produced by the NADO Research Foundation exploring how regional development organizations¹ have addressed the impacts of natural disasters, built resilience to future events, and increased long-term economic competitiveness and quality of life in their regions. This project is supported by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) under Agreement No. 01-79-14223. Any opinions, findings, or recommendations expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of EDA or the NADO Research Foundation.

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) is the Regional Planning Commission and EDA-designated Economic Development District (EDD) for 43 towns and cities in Hampden and Hampshire Counties in Southwestern Massachusetts. PVPC's role in the region is to provide technical assistance in all aspects of planning including zoning, hazard mitigation, transportation, economic development, and environmental planning. As an EDD, they develop a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the region and run various economic development programs. PVPC prepares hazard mitigation plans for their towns and cities, but since the disasters of 2011, they have added several more roles related to disaster recovery and preparedness.

within the Pioneer Valley region.⁴ The Nor'easter dumped up to two and a half feet of snow atop trees that still had foliage. The weight of the snow combined with the storm's high winds brought down trees and power lines, resulting in blocked roads and highways, damaged cars and homes, and five deaths. Approximately 670,000 residents lost power, many for more than a week.⁵

Supporting Local Recovery Efforts

In the wake of these disasters, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) worked closely with the affected towns and cities in their region to help them rebuild, recover, and ultimately be better prepared for the next disaster. Shortly after the tornado, PVPC and the City of Springfield were awarded a disaster recovery grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) to assist with the recovery process. PVPC was provided



with \$37,000 for local capacity building and the City of Springfield was given \$250,000 to develop a rebuilding strategy. Both the awards were matched with local funds.⁶

Rebuild Springfield

Springfield, the largest city in the Pioneer Valley, experienced some of the worst damage from the tornado, with over \$170 million in damage and a one mile stretch of debris left where homes and businesses once stood.⁷ The Nor'easter in October resulted in an additional \$30 million in damage.⁸ The destruction from both disasters was exacerbated by some of the city's existing problems of blight, abandoned homes, debris, and over-growth.⁹ As a result, Develop Springfield, the city's nascent redevelopment authority, spearheaded a citizen-led planning process called Rebuild Springfield. PVPC worked closely with Develop Springfield, offering resources and staff support.

The public participation for Rebuild Springfield was tremendous, with more than 3,000 residents involved in the process. Jay Minkarah, president and CEO of Develop Springfield, said, "The planning process became a part of the healing process for Springfield residents. We were able to stop thinking about what was lost and start thinking about possibilities for the future."¹⁰ He also noted that the community participation extended beyond the planning process. In the wake of these disasters, residents came together in unprecedented numbers to start crime watches, join councils, and organize to rebuild their community.

Rebuild Springfield's planning process totaled nearly \$500,000, with \$250,000 provided through the City's EDA disaster recovery grant and \$250,000 in matching funds from private donors. While the plan was initially focused on rebuilding after the disasters, it became an opportunity for Springfield to reinvent itself and was ultimately adopted as the citywide Master Plan in the spring of 2012.

Thanks in large part to active stakeholder engagement throughout the planning process, Develop Springfield was able to raise



A Pioneer Valley home is crushed by a fallen tree during the tornado in 2011. Credit: Dan Brewer

Key Facts

EDA Funding: \$887,000

Other Funding Sources: \$322,000 in local funds, \$125,000 from Common Capital

Work Description: The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) provided technical assistance to the tornado-devastated town of Monson, worked closely with Springfield while they developed their rebuilding plan, assisted in development of a revolving loan fund for local businesses, and is analyzing and evaluating the disaster recovery framework as it affects local businesses.

Key Outcomes: Increased the region's economic development; improved network of local businesses and economic development community; enhanced zoning processes to maintain historic main street in Monson; brought community together around the rebuilding process; helped local businesses rebuild and recover.

Partners: City of Springfield, Town of Monson, Common Capital, Springfield Business Growth Center

Website: www.PVPC.org

money from private donors to turn many aspects of the plan into a reality. One significant outcome of the plan is a program that provides grants to damaged businesses along the city's Main Street. The grants helped many cherished restaurants and retailers make the repairs needed to reopen, including two local icons: Milano's Deli and the Glory Shoes department store.

PVPC is now working with Develop Springfield to map the outcomes of the Rebuild Springfield plan using GIS. The maps will include information about specific projects and investments that are being made as the city recovers. The maps will be publicly accessible online, allowing stakeholders to track the rebuilding progress and plan for new projects that will strengthen rebuilding efforts.

Zoning Code Changes Help Monson Rebuild

June's tornado also ripped through the village of Monson, causing \$11.9 million in property damage and severely damaging many landmark buildings, including their historic town hall.¹¹ With the help of the EDA grant, PVPC worked closely with Monson to navigate the rebuilding process. With a small staff and a volunteer planning board, Monson's greatest need was assistance updating their outdated Master Plan and zoning code.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many towns across the United States adopted zoning ordinances to regulate development in their rapidly expanding suburbs and exurbs. Little attention was given to historic town centers; the zoning code was mostly concerned



One of many historic buildings in Monson that had irreparable damage from the tornado. Zoning changes allowed Monson to rebuild to similar specifications. Credit: Larry Smith

with the development of strip malls and suburban-style housing as cities sprawled into rural areas. In towns like Monson, most properties in the town center were developed before the zoning ordinance was established and were seldom redeveloped in the years since.

For Monson, this became a problem as they began to rebuild their town center after the tornado. The community wanted new development to retain its former historic character, but the existing zoning ordinance would not allow it. According to Larry Smith, senior planner with PVPC, “93% of properties in Monson town center did not conform to the existing zoning code.”¹² The setbacks were too large, the parking requirements too high, and the density too low. Smith says, “We had to change the zoning to allow reconstruction and redevelopment to match the character of what we had prior to the tornado.”

After hosting a series of community workshops to gather local input, PVPC provided the planning board with 36 targeted recommendations to ensure that new development would be consistent with the community’s vision and preserve the town’s historic character. They worked closely with Monson to adopt more reasonable parking requirements, changes to promote mixed use development, and design guidelines for commercial development. Although PVPC continues to work with Monson to modify their density standards, the town was recently able to rebuild their historic town hall and police station in keeping with the original design thanks to the new zoning ordinances

Providing Support to Small- and Medium-Sized Businesses

In 2013, PVPC and Common Capital, as co-recipients, received a second EDA disaster recovery grant for \$600,000 to assist local businesses that were still struggling to recover from the 2011 disasters. Common Capital, a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) based in Holyoke, is managing a newly-created revolving loan fund (RLF) targeting small businesses in the areas

affected by the tornado and Tropical Storm Irene. \$500,000 of the grant was allocated to the RLF, which Common Capital matched with \$125,000. The remaining \$100,000 of the EDA grant, which PVPC matched with \$35,000, was used to support technical assistance at the Springfield Business Growth Center, to analyze and evaluate existing disaster recovery systems as they affect businesses, and to assist Springfield with the previously mentioned GIS analysis of local recovery efforts.¹³

To date, Common Capital has made loans to five local businesses through the new RLF, infusing approximately \$300,000 into the local economy.¹⁴ These businesses either sustained damage from the 2011 disasters or contribute to local economic development in the affected areas. In one example, Common Capital made a loan to a new restaurant named Carpaccio whose building sustained irreparable damage from the tornado as they prepared for their grand opening.

As a CDFI, Common Capital maintains a close relationship with their clients. They provide business assistance, including help with budgeting and other financial planning services. With Carpaccio, they worked closely to help them find a new location, secure several rounds of financing, and put together a viable budget for long-term success. Common Capital is currently working with several potential clients including a non-profit childcare service that needs to make repairs and building improvements to reopen a facility that was damaged by the tornado.

To provide additional support for local businesses, PVPC partnered with the Business Growth Center (BGC) to expand their services to businesses in the affected area. The Center received \$32,600, including \$18,900 to provide technical assistance to businesses in the disaster zones and \$13,700 for marketing and outreach. The BGC matched these funds with \$18,900 of in-kind services for businesses.¹⁵ Common Capital also works closely with the BGC to identify potential candidates for their revolving loan fund.

The BGC offers critical services and technical support to small- and medium-sized businesses throughout the region. In addition to providing office space for up to 30 business, the BGC interfaces with hundreds of businesses in the region through their seminars and workshops that are aimed at helping businesses grow. Their programs are designed for businesses at various stages of development and include topics such as the basics of starting a business, cash flow and business planning, marketing, and navigating the small business loan process. The center also provides one-on-one consultations, networking opportunities, and, for their tenants, access to conference rooms, a computer lab, and other office equipment.

The BGC currently houses 26 tenants, establishing a strong network of emerging entrepreneurs to encourage collaboration, sharing of best practices, and learning from the experience of

others. As these businesses mature and establish themselves within the community, they will play a critical role in revitalizing and diversifying the local economy.

Integrating Local Businesses into Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery

Looking forward, PVPC is addressing the need to better integrate local businesses into regional planning efforts. From their experience with the 2011 disasters, PVPC found that few resources are available to businesses to help them prepare for, and recover from, a disaster. Lori Tanner, economic development planner with PVPC says, “There are robust systems in place for public safety, shelter, food, utilities, and for essential functions like hospitals, but businesses, especially small businesses, are often not addressed.”¹⁶ Recognizing the need for improved assistance to businesses, PVPC is currently working with stakeholders to improve the overall preparedness of the business community.

To begin this process, PVPC conducted a series of outreach meetings with key business and emergency preparedness stakeholders, including the local area Chambers of Commerce, the U.S. Small Business Administration, the Western Region Homeland Security Advisory Council, and business advisors from neighboring counties. PVPC staff members are also doing a desk review of disaster recovery plans in their region and from similar regions throughout the country to identify new strategies for improving business preparedness, continuity, and recovery.

Through this work, PVPC aims to better understand how businesses receive information before, during, and after a disaster and identify the resources that are available to help them. The recommendations stemming from this research are intended to help businesses access the information they need for everything from the immediate clean-up to helping them through grant or loan processes. By working closely with communities, local and



A signpost among fallen trees is a casualty of the tornado. Credit: Hermine Levey Weston

regional emergency preparedness entities, chambers of commerce, business associations, the emergency response community, and other business assistance organizations, PVPC seeks to build new communication networks that will result in a better defined disaster recovery system for their business community.

Jay Minkarah, President and CEO of Develop Springfield, said “the critical thing for the [post-disaster] planning process is to create a blueprint for how to respond to the [disaster’s] impact.”¹⁶ PVPC and its partners succeeded in doing this for Springfield, for Monson, and are now working towards a blueprint for their region’s entire business community. As the region continues to rebuild after a particularly devastating 2011, the programs that PVPC and its partners have designed and implemented are certain to help their region weather the next disaster.

This report was researched and written by freelance writer Kimberly Colopinto with guidance from NADO staff.

¹The term “regional development organization” refers to the multi-jurisdictional regional planning and development organizations that exist throughout the country and are known by various names in different states, including councils of government, regional councils, economic development districts, local development districts, and planning and development councils. These public-based entities play an invaluable role in fostering intergovernmental collaboration among federal, state, and local officials; deliver and manage federal and state programs; and work to solve area-wide issues and to address the fundamental building blocks required for competitive and sustainable communities and economies.

²Niles, Danielle (2014) “Eye On Weather: Tornadoes Have a History In Central Western Mass.” CBS Boston, March 29, 2014. Link: <http://boston.cbslocal.com/2014/03/29/eye-on-weather-tornadoes-have-a-history-in-central-western-mass/>

³2012 Community & Economic Development Report (CEDs) for Pioneer Valley Economic Development District

⁴Ibid, 2012

⁵Ibid, 2012

⁶Tanner, Lori, Personal Interview, February 19, 2015.

⁷The City of Springfield Community Development Block Grant– Disaster Recovery—Partial Action Plan A. August 2013. Link: https://www3.springfield-ma.gov/planning/fileadmin/Planning_files/Community_Development/CDBG_DR_Action_Plan_FINAL_DRAFT_English_8_22_2013.pdf

⁸Ibid, 2013

⁹Develop Springfield Plan: <http://developspringfield.com/pdf/1-CITY%20FINAL-Reduced.pdf>

¹⁰Minkarah, Jay, Personal Interview, March 25, 2015.

¹¹Appleton, John. (2011) “Monson tornado debris cleanup expenses top \$3.4 million” Mass Live. June 30, 2011. Link: http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2011/06/monson_expenses_for_debris_cle.html

¹²Smith, Larry, Personal Interview, March 10, 2015.

¹³Tanner, Lori, Personal Interview, February 19, 2015.

¹⁴Abbate, Michael, Personal Interview, March 10, 2015.

¹⁵Tanner, Lori, Personal Interview, February 19, 2015.

¹⁶Tanner, Lori, Personal Interview, February 19, 2015.

¹⁷Minkarah, Jay, Personal Interview, March 25, 2015.