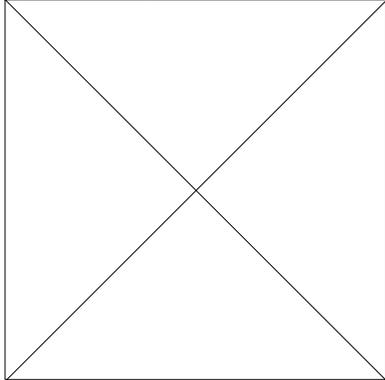


# Tropical Storm Irene still taking toll on trailer park

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Dennis Richards demolished a mold-ravaged home at The Spruces, a retirement... (Bill Greene/Globe Staff)

**WILLIAMSTOWN** - Seven months after Tropical Storm Irene punished this pocket of the Berkshires, the view from Roger and Loretta Martin's mobile home remains startling: other mobile homes leveled to their decks, stripped of siding by demolition workers or vandals; wood and glass and misshapen metal tossed about the trailer park. The

Martins, both 71, are among the lucky. Their home still stands. Nearly 200 of their former neighbors at The Spruces mobile home park no longer live there.

Flooding from the adjacent Hoosic River scattered the residents, mostly people over 55 and on low incomes, throughout the region - to apartments they cannot afford, to the homes of relatives, or to motels where they pay the bill with what is left of federal disaster checks.

"It's been hell, that's what it's been," said Arthur Smith, 82, who lost the trailer he shared with his wife, plus another he had bought for his sister.

It has also been a continuing primer in emergency response for a bucolic college town of 6,000 full-time residents. Indeed, the park owner's attorney said he believes that no other mobile home site in Massachusetts has ever been hit as hard. In all, 158 of 225 trailers have been condemned. To compound the pain, scarce resources to help the displaced have all but dried up.

Almost all available individual assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency - up to \$30,200 per applicant, for a total of \$3.6 million through last week - has been distributed to eligible residents. There are no vacancies in Williamstown's subsidized housing. And FEMA has no plans to bring in temporary replacement trailers.

Compared with the broad publicity that Irene's rampage brought to Vermont, a state less than 5 miles away to the north, the displaced in Williamstown feel flooded and forgotten. "There's this sense that we were going to take care of our own," said Rita Farrell, senior adviser for the nonprofit Massachusetts Housing Partnership, who has helped the town respond to the disaster. "But you really can't take care of your own. It's too big."

Townpeople tried, raising more than \$100,000 in donations. Williams College students cooked meals for the residents. And Town Hall opened its doors for a week to house five of the displaced and eight of their pets. "I said nobody sleeps in their car in Williamstown," Town Manager Peter Fohlin recalled last week, pausing to check his emotions. "Town Hall is where they've got to take you in."

For all the damage, which displaced 5 percent of Williamstown's population, the trauma was largely limited to the town's most vulnerable residents. This disaster was not visible," said Cathy Yamamoto, chairwoman of the town's Affordable Housing Committee. "If there were more than 150 homes destroyed anywhere else, it would be all over the news."

Even now, driving past The Spruces on Main Street, few signs of the damage can be seen. Two outside lion sculptures mark a long entrance to the 37-acre park, which opened in 1954. A fountain lends a bit of rustic elegance to a small pond. And a towering row of spruces hides the battered remnants of trailers that lie between the trees and the Hoosic River. "To the average person, it looked like nothing happened," Fohlin said. That may be because for many in Williamstown, The Spruces had long been invisible. "I had never been in that park before last year, and I've lived here for 28 years," Yamamoto said.

But to those who called it home, the no-frills, low-anxiety, slow-pace Spruces was special. "I fell in love with this place," said Tom Richards, 69, who slept in his car for days after the flood and now lives in a North Adams apartment, where his \$800 rent is three times the lot fee he paid at The Spruces. "There were a lot of people who would sit under the cabana every night and talk. Sometimes, someone would start singing," Richards said.

Smith fondly recalled his 10-mile daily bicycle rides around the narrow roads in The Spruces. Now, he lives in what he called "the cheapest thing I could find," a house in North Adams. But that depleted his savings and required him to take out a \$30,000 loan - for a house that still needed extensive repairs.

To Roger and Loretta Martin, whose home was not destroyed, the chance to remain at The Spruces is a much-needed stroke of random good fortune. "I don't even have money for an apartment," said Roger Martin, who recently underwent treatment for throat cancer. "What were we going to do? This is all we've got," Loretta added.

Only 64 of the 225 mobile homes in The Spruces are inhabited, and just three others can possibly be reclaimed, town officials said. Fifty-eight homes have been demolished, and 100 are waiting to be removed. "I was planning on getting old here, and so was everyone else," said Cynthia Clermont-Rebello, 65, president of The Spruces Tenants Association. Although her home was not damaged, Clermont-Rebello said that she and other residents are fearful the owners might close The Spruces. Worried residents cited a request filed in Berkshire Superior Court in Pittsfield by the owner of the park, Morgan Management of Pittsford, N.Y. An attorney for Morgan Management said the company wants a judge to declare the disaster an act of God, which might waive its liability for reconstruction, among other responsibilities.

But residents fear that the legal action might let the company skirt state housing regulations that require a two-year notice before changing the use of the property. "We have not abandoned our residents," said Rob Kraus, an attorney for Morgan Management. "We are seeking every method to assist everyone involved." However, Kraus said, the park is operating at a substantial loss, and he could not estimate how long The Spruces will operate. "That answer, I don't have," he said.

Even town officials do not expect The Spruces to remain open indefinitely. The site lies in a flood plain, and more storm-related danger is inevitable. "According to the weatherman, they're safe for the next seven days," Fohlin said on a sunny day last week. "After that, no one can say."

Higher Ground, a local nonprofit formed to respond to the disaster, still receives calls every day from people struggling with repair bills, the FEMA bureaucracy, and a frustrated search for permanent housing. The Rev. Carrie Bail, president of Higher Ground and pastor of First Congregational Church, said she keeps hoping for a surprise, a miracle even: the discovery of a low-cost apartment, or donated land for new housing, or an unexpected gift from a benefactor.

"My hope," Bail said, "is that this town, as a community, is going to say, 'We are going to step up and take care of these people.'"