

The Irene Effect A VPR Special

“The Irene Effect” takes stock of where Vermont stands nearly four months after the historic flood.

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Transcript:

(Weather forecast) “...deteriorating weather conditions beginning late tonight and especially Sunday as Hurricane Irene tracks up the mid-Atlantic coast...”

(Steve Zind) It’s not unusual for the remnants of a hurricane to straggle up the coast and give Vermont a good drenching.

We were warned Irene would be different, but no one could anticipate the fury of a storm that would drive rivers over their banks in more than half the state, taking homes, businesses and lives.

On August 28, 2011, the way Vermonters view their world changed.

I’m Steve Zind. In the next hour we’ll hear stories of lives and communities reshaped by the storm, of the limitless generosity of neighbors and the limited resources of government, and of the hard lessons learned as Vermont braces for future storms. This is the Irene Effect.

The rain started in the early hours of a Sunday morning. For a little while it seemed like just another rainy day.

(Woman) “It was raining steady. Not pouring, but hard. And while we sat in that little church there next to the brook, we could see the brook rising.”

(Zind) There was a moment it seemed the rivers and brooks vaulted over their banks and everything changed. People grabbed what they could and scrambled to higher ground.

(Woman) “At one point they didn't know if they should turn all the cattle loose that we had in the barn or what. And there was just no time to make that decision. It was like, ‘We have to get out of here.’”

(Man) “We left in chest deep water with the baby on my wife’s shoulders and we live here in this house with my 94 year-old grandfather and helping him out we all left with water up to our chests.”

(Zind) The day after Irene, under a clear blue sky, Vermonters took stock of what Irene left behind.

Five people perished in the flood. Rutland municipal employee Michael Garafano and his 24 year-old son Michael Gregory drowned trying to protect the city water supply. Rutland’s mayor paid emotional tribute to Garafano’s dedication.

(Rutland Mayor Chris Louras) “It’s extremely easy to speak in platitudes. But words cannot convey the caliber of an individual that Michael was.”

(Zind) Around the state 1,400 families were driven from their homes. They took refuge in Red Cross Shelters, and with relatives and neighbors.

(Man) “I have a doctor, I mow his lawn and kind of care-take his house. He said the house is ours to use until we get back on the ground. It’s amazing.”

(Zind) Help came in many forms. The National Guard shuttled supplies to isolated towns. At house after flood-damaged house, strangers arrived bearing buckets and shovels to muck out flooded cellars. One person’s act of kindness inspired another, and another. Before Irene, no one could have guessed so many Vermonters owned heavy equipment.

(Man) “I had a guy come over to me and let me use his backhoe. And I told him I appreciate it but first of all, I don’t know your name, and I don’t know how to run it!”

(Woman on radio) “Ok, anybody, I’ve got a generator, I need to know where to put it...”

(Zind) Irene altered Vermont’s landscape. And it changed our *relationship* to the landscape as we came to grips with the reality that this could happen again; not in one hundred years but in the near future. We have been part of one of Vermont’s historic natural disasters. Where people used to refer to changes from the 1927 flood, they will now look to 2011.

(Zind) The Irene drama had many acts. One of the most striking was a disappearing act. Land simply vanished. We’ve learned the limits of what we can do for the people who lived there.

Kara Fitzgerald and Ryan Wood-Beauchamp feel fortunate their house was spared. But their livelihood was not. Much of their 9 1/2 acre farm in Cuttingsville disappeared.

The Mill River didn't just overflow, it moved. With meticulous efficiency, the water scrubbed the soil away, leaving a barren landscape of dull-rocks scattered with uprooted trees and debris.

Kara Fitzgerald grew up in urban New Jersey. She discovered her passion as a child at a farm summer camp.

At college, Kara met Ryan Wood-Beauchamp.

The two worked at the college farm. After graduation they started a small market garden.

By 2010 it was time to buy a farm. Vermont beckoned.

Kara and Ryan bought a place in Cuttingsville in Rutland County. They named it Evening Song Farm.

They worked tons of compost into a neglected hayfield and struggled to repair their used equipment, with help from friends and family.

At 25 years old, they had settled on what they wanted out of life.

(Fitzgerald) “I think the most exciting part of farming and the farm lifestyle was how rewarding hard work is and how nourishing it is for our souls.”

(Zind) Fifty families signed up to buy vegetables directly from their farm. There was enough to sell to restaurants, too, and at farmers markets. It was a good start for their fledging business and the summer was full of promise.

The season was about halfway over when Irene hit. The flood took the crops and the soil and what it left behind looks more lunar than earthly.

A few days after Irene the couple stood outside their house and described the scene.

(Fitzgerald) “We’re looking at what used to be our vegetable fields. There’s rocks, debris and the remains of our greenhouse; no vegetables, no soil, no subsoil.”

(Zind) More than half of their farm was washed away. The unthinkable had happened.

(Wood-Beauchamp) “I felt complete despair at that point. I had no idea what we were going to do with our land destroyed like this. We’re paying a mortgage on our place and we had counted on this land to be the one really permanent thing for us.”

(Zind) Gratitude took its place alongside despair. There was an outpouring of support for the couple. Friends and strangers came by to offer help. People brought meals. Someone stopped by simply to do the dishes.

Two months after the flood the couple had discovered that Irene’s grip on their lives had tightened.

(Wood-Beauchamp) “And while I’m still so grateful for all the connections we have and all the ways people are supporting us, the sadness of the losses is really starting to sink in for me.”

(Fitzgerald) “It sounds ridiculous to say but it was just recently that I just went outside and my body finally registered that I lost the farm. I guess I’ve never experienced a loss quite like this. It shakes my understanding of control and what’s safe in the world. Starting a small farm takes so much energy. It takes all your energy and beyond. This loss also feels like I lost (pause) me.”

(Zind) Ryan and Kara are just as committed to farming, but their convictions are tempered by some hard financial realities. They’re paying a mortgage on something that doesn’t exist. Their modest house survived the flood, but the value of their property was in the land.

As devastating as the loss of their farm is, there’s no insurance policy or government program that can restore it.

In the statewide fundraising that followed Irene, more than two million dollars has been donated to help farmers. Kara Fitzgerald and Ryan Wood Beauchamp have benefited from that.

They hope that in time, it will help them start over.

Time seems like a luxury for Jim Wilson of Northfield. He’s 67 and worried that because of Irene the future he’d planned is permanently out of reach. Wilson works as the heating plant supervisor at Norwich University in Northfield. His gray hair is pulled back in a ponytail. His name embroidered above the pocket of his blue work shirt.

At the end of the workday, he heads home. Only ‘home’ is a tricky word.

There’s the home that he and his wife, Melody, are living in for the winter.

And there’s the one he has a mortgage on – the uninhabitable one; an old wood frame house that’s been mucked out and gutted up to the first floor. It’s a scene familiar to many people flooded by Irene. Wilson comes to check on his old house nearly every day.

(Wilson) *“What’s this?!”*

(Zind) There’s a small notice stuck to the door.

(Wilson) *“It says, ‘We found this property to be vacant or abandoned, this information will be reported to the mortgage holder’. I don’t know what this means”*

(Zind) There’s been no shortage of FEMA representatives and other help, but for Wilson the whole process has been like wandering through a maze. There are unexpected, unexplained complications around every corner.

(Wilson) *“Every day there’s something else that has to be taken care of, another form that has to be filled out, or refilled out, a phone call that has to be made or taken, and (sighs) it just has been nonstop, it keeps going on and on and on and I don’t see this stopping or even slowing down for another year.”*

(Zind) Inside the empty house it’s a gloomy scene. The walls are stripped to the studs. The dark wide planks of the sub-floor are speckled with mold.

(Wilson) *“Which is a huge health risk for my wife Melody. She has emphysema and that would be deadly.”*

(Zind) After months of phone calls and paperwork, Wilson is debating whether to settle with his insurance company for well below what he’d expected.

Even if they eventually qualify for FEMA money, the reality is that Jim and Melody Wilson’s financial situation has changed dramatically. What equity they had in their home is gone now, and what they’ll have for *future* housing is uncertain.

(Wilson, driving) *“So we’ve gone from Water Street, and we’re going to head up here, to Hill Street, where we’re staying now, so we’ve gone from the river to the hill...”*

(Zind) In one bit of good news, the couple has the loan of a home for the winter.

Compared to their old house, this one is sunny and bright – something Melody has been enjoying.

(walking into house, Jim calls out *“Melody!”*)

(Zind) But as much as Wilson appreciates having a place to stay, he’s uneasy living in a house that doesn’t belong to him.

(Wilson) *“I’m still dealing with the loss of it all, you know, and as comfortable as she feels, I still feel that uncomfortable feeling that I’m in somebody else’s house.”*

(Zind) And Irene has followed the couple here in the form of daily phone calls and paperwork, which Melody tries to stay on.

(Melody Wilson) “Here’s the FEMA grants folder. Here’s the relief fund, the Northfield relief fund. That’s been a great help.”

(Dog barks, “Wanna go for a walk?”)

(Zind) Wilson takes some pleasure in a daily walk with the dog, but his worries tag along.

(Wilson) “I don’t get the opportunity to get away from that – to stop thinking about it. If there were some way just to escape from it, that would be great. But that’s not the reality of this. The reality is we have to deal with it.”

(Zind) And the reality, Wilson says, is that at a time when he thought he’d be retiring, he now faces the prospect of having to *rebuild* his life.

(Jim Wilson) “It’s different, I think, if you’re younger. You tend to get through these things, and you have youth on your side, so that you can get on with the rest of your life. At my age, what do I have to look forward to, you know. It’s just... that slap in the face, that wake up call that tells you life is not all that it’s cracked up to be.”

(Zind) For Wilson there’s no line on a government form to tally the emotional cost of losing your home when you’re 67.

There’s no compensation for anxiety, no mitigation program for loss of independence and fears about the future.

For Wilson, the Irene Effect is a future that looks very different than it did before August 28th. While town and state government can rebuild roads and bridges, it’s another matter to rebuild an individual life.

Tracey Towne is dealing with the same uncertainty over how she can get back on her feet and into a home of her own. At 41 and with two children to raise, Towne has found strength and a voice she didn’t know she had in her determination to overcome the Irene Effect.

(Tracey in car, grabbing mail from mailbox)

(Zind) Though she no longer lives there, Towne still swings by the Patterson Mobile Home Park in Duxbury to pick up the mail.

It’s just one of the adjustments she’s had to make since Irene.

Nearly a third of the homes significantly damaged in Irene were mobile homes and Towne’s was among them.

Many trailer park residents are low income wage earners or living on a fixed income, and there simply isn’t any housing as affordable as a mobile home.

The lot rental and mortgage on the mobile home that Towne shared with her two sons and partner, amounted to a little over \$300 a month. Now, she pays nearly \$1,000 for an apartment on the other side of the river, in Waterbury.

(Towne) “Not only were we living week to week, but now we’re struggling even more to even get it day by day, let alone week by week or month by month. Yeah, it’s hard. It’s gonna be hard.”

(Zind) One of the first problems Towne faced was finding a place near where her kids, Justin and Dylan, go to school.

(Towne to child) “Hi honey, Mom’s home”

(Zind) Now she’s concerned about the bills piling up on the kitchen table.

After mobile home owners rallied to protest the thousands of dollars it cost them to have their homes removed, a fund was set up to pay the cost. But Towne and her partner Robert paid to have what was left of their home hauled away before there was a fund. They paid in advance but now, the waste removal company has sent another bill.

(Towne) “When I called them to discuss getting a dumpster I was told it was 586 bucks – that’s all I was told, so we paid it and then two or three weeks later, I get a \$2,100 bill!”

(Zind) When she isn’t being a mom, Towne works a seasonal job taking phone orders and customer service calls at Harrington’s of Vermont.

Since Irene hit, she’s also been speaking out on behalf of mobile home owners.

At one forum Towne talked about the lack of affordable housing and how ends don’t meet when your rent suddenly triples.

(Towne) “I don’t know where I will come up with the money to fill this gap. It may look like we have found a place and everything is okay, but we are definitely not okay”.

(Zind) In the short term, Towne is using some of her nearly \$30,000 FEMA grant fill her rent gap. But she needs to save that money. Without it she won’t have the down payment for another mobile home.

If she can swing it, Towne plans to rebuild back in the old mobile home park, in spite of how Irene flooded it.

(Towne) “Unfortunately to live higher you need to fork out a lot more money. You know, I think living in the lower ground is more of an affordable area. It’s just, you know, you build it up a little bit and pray it doesn’t happen for another eighty or ninety years and hope that you’re not part of it and neither are your kids.”

(Zind) Towne is tapping every resource available to help her rebuild. She’s hoping to get a subsidy to help with the rent, and on this particular day, she’s at Waterbury’s disaster relief headquarters, to find out about re-applying for an SBA loan.

(Towne) “I applied once and was denied.”

(Woman) “There is an 800 number. They’ll send you a new 8821 so give them a call.”

(Zind) In the weeks after the storm, Towne was here for hours at a time, day after day, anguishing over what to do about a place to live. She got a lot of help from FEMA representative Lisa Hanson.

(Towne) “I’ve been wanting to come down and thank you for all your help

(Hanson) “Just so happy to see a smile on your face!”

(Zind) After months of turmoil, Tracey Towne has begun turning a corner in the daily battle of recovery from Irene.

(Towne) “All right, it was awesome meeting you again, thank you!”

(Hanson) “Best of luck, Tracey!”

(Towne) “I can’t let Irene completely run my life. She’s run it for two months, she’ll run it for a year. But I need to move on.”

(Zind) Towne knows that some effects of Irene *will* linger. Her 9 year-old, for example, has new fears about floods.

And Towne says the past few months have strained her relationship with Robert.

Back at home, she gets ready to head out with her kids for another meeting in her new role as an advocate for mobile home park residents.

(Towne) “I don’t know, sometimes you think it’s because you’re a lower income, fixed income, disability...whatever. But you just don’t feel like you’re as important as everybody else.”

(Zind) Towne says she sees how some people draw strength from adversity and she counts herself among them.

(Towne) “We’re strong people. If it comes down to it, we may not have been strong before August 28th, we will be now, that’s for sure.”

(Zind) Irene has given Traci Towne a new found strength and confidence; to face the future and speak up for herself and her neighbors.

This is the Irene Effect on Vermont Public Radio.

*(Singing) “Oh Irene, you’re really, really, really, really mean.
Oh Irene, you put on quite the scene
Oh, you put on quite the scene
But you didn’t take away our dream!”*

(Man driving through Rochester) “Here’s the electric substation. All the way across as far as you can see in the flats there, there was water. And then you go around the corner and everything looks fine. It’s pretty amazing...”

(Zind) One of the things we marveled at in the days after Irene was how selective it could be in its devastation.

Stand on the picturesque town green in Rochester the day after the storm and you couldn’t see the destruction. But just to the south a highway ended in the river and the graves of a cemetery were laid open by the water. To the north a house had tumbled into the water, lopsided and broken.

But Irene took a more evenhanded approach in the southern Vermont village of Wilmington. The entire center of town was underwater. More than 40 businesses were closed. Foliage season was right around the corner – a time when tourists descend on the historic village.

No other Vermont town was put so completely out of business as Wilmington when Irene came calling. Slowly it’s putting itself back together.

A few days after the flood, Wilmington resident Nicki Steel took stock.

(Steel) “The village will never be the same village. I mean, there isn't one business in the downtown area that didn't have four to six feet of water running through it.”

(Zind) The Wilmington gallery owned by artist Ann Coleman and her husband Joe Specht was literally swept down the street and into the river. The couple plans to rebuild on the same spot, but the new gallery will be above the level of Irene’s flood waters.

The two have been strenuously fundraising to help pay for the construction. They didn’t have flood insurance and the money available to small businesses comes in the form of loans, not grants.

In a down economy, they’re afraid to add to their debt. Specht says other Wilmington business owners are also doing what they can to avoid borrowing.

(Specht) “So many people in town are cashing in IRAs prematurely to start over again. It’s a lot of people who I think were hoping they were going to be cashing in the IRAs in a few years for other purposes.”

(Zind) There was another flood that devastated Wilmington; back in 1938. The high water mark from that disaster is painted on a building in the center of the village.

(Downey) “We’d see that mark every day and say, ‘those poor folks in ’38, what must they have gone through’. Little did we realize we’d beat it by six or eight inches in 2011.”

(Zind) Kevin Downey and his wife Lori owned Bean Heads, a popular restaurant and café in the center of the village. Bean Heads was known for its coffee and for Lori Downey’s homemade soups, quiches and desserts.

(Downey) “Here’s the front door. This was a foyer...”

(Zind) The first floor of the historic building where the Downeys leased space is gutted now. Kevin Downey figures he lost \$100,000 worth of equipment and stock.

Lori won’t visit this flooded out space. The memories of the devastation are too much.

(Lori Downey) “If you had had this conversation with us right after this had happened, I wouldn’t have been able to sit here and talk.”

(Zind) For Lori Downey Bean Heads held a lot of memories. It’s where they spent time with kids and grandchildren during the long workdays. And she and Kevin first met at Bean Heads while she was working there. They bought the business in 2003. Kevin is a millwright by trade, so he had a lot to learn.

(Kevin Downey) “A latte, what the heck is that?”

(Lori Downey) “He ended up being a really good floor man and the kids adored him so we’d seen children grow from infants. Just a real family oriented place with all the local people in town.”

(Zind) But Bean Heads was struggling before Irene. The bad economy took its toll. Kevin Downey says receipts were down five to 10 percent each year. They were working to sell when the flood hit. Ironically, Irene has rekindled their desire to keep the business.

(Lori Downey) “And we miss it so much. It’s crazy how you miss something once it’s gone.”

(Kevin Downey) “We have so many people, whenever we go out to get a newspaper, go shopping, say ‘when are you coming back? Are you coming back?’”

(Zind) The Downeys want to reopen Bean Heads, but they won’t return to the flooded building they were in. They’re looking for something on higher ground.

In the meantime they’re trying to figure out how to come back. They’ve received a small amount in grants and insurance paid them some money, but they’ve had to absorb most of their losses. Kevin Downey says both Small Business Administration and Vermont Economic Development Authority have offered loan money, but he’s reluctant to take it.

Without their business to support them, the couple is living off unemployment and a small pension Kevin receives. The challenge isn’t just financial, it’s emotional.

(Kevin Downey) “It’s been very surreal. One day you’re living your normal life. Your everyday life. You get up at 4, you’re at work at 5, you open the doors at 6. From that 7 days a week, to nothing to do.”

(Lori Downey) “Washed away in just a matter of hours. We have a really nice man in town that does therapy and I’ve been going to him. ‘Cause now you can’t sleep and you’re having dreams. Water. Mud. Floods.”

(Zind) The Downeys are trying to keep busy. Lori is satisfying her love of cooking by making food for senior citizens.

Kevin spends some time most days in his garage, cleaning the little that remains from Bean Heads.

(Downey) “Plates. Plates covered with mud.”

(Zind) The Downeys haven’t had any success finding a new location yet. They’re holding out for a location on higher ground.

Owners of each of Wilmington’s flooded businesses have faced decisions similar to the Downeys. Some have reopened. Others have moved or closed. The town and local groups are helping them get back on their feet but whether the village will completely recover is still an unknown. What’s certain is that haunts familiar to visitors and locals alike are gone now, and the Wilmington of days to come will have a new face – courtesy of Irene.

Every town Irene touched has its own unique Irene problems. One they have in common is how to pay for the repairs.

(Horn) “...Barnard, Barnet, Bethel, Braintree, Grafton, Chester, Moretown, Plymouth. It’s really kind of depressing.”

(Zind) At her office at the Vermont League of Cities and Towns Karen Horn leafs through a list of towns that have borrowed more than their annual budgets just for Irene repairs.

While the state which is virtually assured that federal highway funds will pay for 90% of the damage to roads and bridges, towns are less sure about how much they’ll be reimbursed for their work. It could be as much as 95% or it could be a lot less if FEMA disallows some of the work.

Horn says there are still so many unanswered questions towns are waiting for FEMA to answer that she gets the sense Irene is a particular challenge for the agency.

(Horn) “It seems to me they haven’t dealt with exactly this kind of situation before. The level of destruction here and the statewide nature of it are new to them.”

(Zind) FEMA says the fact that Irene’s devastation was so spread out *is* unusual but not unique.

Beyond the cost of repairs, towns are grappling with other issues. Tax revenues will be affected by abatements for owners of ruined houses and businesses. Some property could be taken off the tax rolls for good under the FEMA flood buyout program. And Horn says Irene’s impact on communities doesn’t just boil down to dollars.

(Horn) “I think it will take years for towns to recover, and I’m speaking about towns in the global sense: The community, the people who lost their homes. And there are good sides to it too. People came together in ways that we haven’t seen in our lifetimes and I think that’s a game changer.”

(Zind) The day Irene descended on Waterbury, village officials opened a shelter, and nervously monitored Main Street.

(Village Trustee, Natalie Howell) “I’m just walking the streets to see if I can coordinate with some of the people, seeing how we can make sure that folks get to the shelter if they need to.”

(Woman) “You here to volunteer?” “Yeah” “Throw your names on that sign up sheet...”

(Zind) A day after Irene, volunteers began pouring into town to help people muck out and clean up.

Homeowners dug out to the din of generators and sump pumps.

(Homeowner) “We’ve had a full house of volunteers for the last 3 days. Right now, people are in the house, taking out the kitchen cabinets, pulling them out to get to the sheetrock that’s there...”

(Zind) Of all the towns that were flooded, Waterbury’s situation may be the most unique and precarious. While other towns wonder *when* they’ll recover from the Irene Effect, Waterbury is asking *if* it will recover.

225 homes and businesses were damaged, including the town offices: Nearly a *third* of all the properties in the village. Many had water five to six feet deep on their first floors.

(Shepeluk) “I didn’t hear anybody whine. I didn’t hear anyone say ‘why me’.”

(Zind) Bill Shepeluk is Waterbury’s municipal manager.

(Shepeluk) “I can’t imagine six feet of water in my first floor, it’s just unimaginable.”

(Zind) There’s been about \$9 million of damage to taxable property.

And that doesn’t even take into account what happened down at the eastern end of Main Street, at the sprawling State Office Complex.

The campus of century old brick buildings, surrounded by wide lawns shaded by handsome maples covers 160 acres along the Winooski River.

Irene left all but one of the 49 buildings, including the state hospital uninhabitable. Most of the 1,500 state employees who worked here have moved to offices outside Waterbury.

Bill Shepeluk says the town felt the loss immediately. People who once were in and out of restaurants, grocery stores, and dry cleaners, were now gone.

(Shepeluk) “You know, every job has a multiplier. So every dollar of payroll maybe translates into seven or eight or twelve dollars I pay you. And then you buy something from someone else and that dollar just gets circulated through a community...”

(Ellis) “They’re really the lifeblood of our community and our downtown...”

(Zind) Rebecca Ellis is a state representative who also chairs the Waterbury selectboard.

(Ellis) “And it’s not just cafes and restaurants that depend on those employees being there, there’s many secondary impacts. People get business in Waterbury because the state employees are there.”

(Zind) More than half of Albert Caron’s customers were state workers. Caron’s Waterbury Service Center is just a block from the State Office Complex.

(Caron) “I probably get eight or 10 walk-ins every day. And for the last two weeks, I’ve had nobody. And unfortunately it’s not just my biz it’s everybody up and down Waterbury. And I’m real worried about it because I have kind of a prediction about it that we’re gonna be okay? We’re gonna survive. But, to the point of ‘what’s it gonna cost to survive?’ I don’t know.”

(Zind) It’s stories like this that keep Town Manager Bill Shepeluk awake at night, worrying about his town’s future.

(Shepeluk) “At some point the progress gets slower and slower as time goes on and when things start to slow down, and today looks like yesterday and it looks like last week. That’s where I fear people start to just get ground down by the whole process.”

(Church bell chimes)

(Zind) Out on Main Street, a church bell still chimes daily. But daily life in Waterbury isn’t the same since Irene. The state hasn’t yet committed to renovating the Waterbury complex and the 1500 people Waterbury businesses count on might never return.

(Shepeluk) “There are a lot of great restaurants – it’s an attractive place for people to come! And that’s all at risk now.”

(Zind) For many in Waterbury, the Irene Effect appears to be an endless stretch of uncertainty.

The town anticipates a drop in property tax receipts this year, with some homeowners requesting abatements, and others failing to pay altogether. Then there are the unanticipated costs of Irene cleanup. Trash removal alone was an unbudgeted \$150,000.

Shepeluk says Waterbury may run a deficit at the end of the fiscal year, and he wonders whether residents might consider a tax increase, or opt for budget cuts next year.

(Shepeluk) “If we have to cut, well what gets cut? So there’s a lot of uncertainty, and...that’s not conducive for sleeping, either.”

(Zind) There are many more unanswered questions such as, what will be the impact of the flood on property values in the village? And will it happen again?

(Church congregation singing)

(Zind) Irene tested Waterbury, and from the very beginning the community responded with resilience, and a show of faith. On the first Sunday after the storm Waterbury churches were crowded with worshipers. It was a brief time out from long days of cleaning up with the help of the scores of volunteers who streamed off the Interstate to pitch in side by side with locals.

(Volunteer) “Just a strong back, willing to work and I’ve got the time to help out.”

(Zind) Two months after the Irene, residents on flooded Randall Street came back to their deserted neighborhood to celebrate Halloween. It was their way of preserving a shred of normalcy in spite of everything. A few were getting ready to move back in ‘soon’.

(Resident) “Getting close, another week or so, hope to be back in...”

(Zind) Waterbury has taken the first steps toward confronting some of the long-term challenges it faces.

And the town learned that it had landed a federal grant to create a long-term development plan post-Irene, one that asks the town to ‘think big’.

Bill Shepeluk sees the grant as a way for Waterbury to ‘make the most of its uncertainty’, and maybe even become a model for how properties along New England’s rivers can be developed successfully, and safely.

He points to the town’s new fire station, which was built to withstand a 100-year flood and came through Irene in good shape. Shepeluk envisions new buildings designed like it.

(Shepeluk) “I’m hopeful that things will come together here, and 5,10, 20 years down the road we’ll look back and say ‘wouldn’t recommend it to anybody, but, it helped us carve out a new path and we rose to a level that maybe we would not have seen, in terms of vibrancy of a community, if the flood hadn’t happened. You know, the old adage is you have to adapt or you die.”

(Zind) All along Main Street the Irene Effect is clear: Waterbury is a changed place. The busy midday hum of workers on their lunch break is gone. It’s much quieter now, as Waterbury anticipates what comes next and the possibility that it will no longer be the hub of state government.

(Emergency Management official) “We have just numerous roads out, washed out, bridges down, collapsed culverts, unlike anything we’ve seen in many years. We actually have crews that are stranded on the roads where we’ve had washouts on both sides of them and they’re literally stuck there.”

(Zind) Irene left behind a jumble of asphalt and concrete. 530 miles of state roads were shut down by flooding and 200 bridges were damaged. They all needed immediate repair. More than that: Transportation officials wondered how to make them better for future floods.

To deal with the urgent need to get the roads repaired, VTRANS turned to an organizational tool called the Incident Command system, which was developed in the 1970s to deal with California wildfires.

That led to the idea of setting up command centers in Dummerston, Berlin and Rutland to oversee repairs. Much better than trying to run everything from Montpelier.

(Sounds of heavy equipment)

(Joe Flynn) “I saw signs of high water yesterday in the White River near Route 107 in Stockbridge that was easily 20 feet higher than the banks...”

(Zind) The Dummerston command center covered 56 towns – and some of the most severe road damage. The center’s commander Joe Flynn led a tour of the work, including one location dubbed ‘Cavendish Canyon’ where both the road and the land under it had vanished.

(Flynn) “We’re looking at projects that are requiring 70, 80 and 90 thousand cubic yards of material. To put that in perspective a regular dump truck carries 12 to 14 cubic yards. So these are very big holes.”

(Zind) More than 2,000 people were pressed into service by VTRANS: National Guard members from eight states, transportation workers from around New England, and scores of private contractors.

Initially, the cost estimates were stratospheric. But the number came way down over time and the federal government stepped up its assistance.

VTRANS chief engineer Richard Tetreault says some roads destroyed by the flood were built back when there was little thought given to engineering and with poor materials and smaller equipment. Those roads are now in better shape for future floods.

In other places, enlarging culverts and roads and bridges designed to withstand bigger floods may be part of the answer. Tetreault says traditionally town roads are designed for 25-year floods, state highways for 50-year events and the Interstate for a 100-year flood.

(Tetreault) “And that has just been a historical way of how society and civil engineering and policies have evolved. Maybe there’s some evaluation of ‘are those where we need to be?’”

(Zind) Tetreault says it will take several years to complete repairs.

Looking ahead even further, he worries that we’ll forget the lessons of Irene.

(Tetreault) “Will we remember? We may not see another Irene for 50 years. What will the land use and habitat mind set be in the coming decades before the next one comes. Because it’s not only how we build the transportation system. Its how we’ve developed the landscape around it. Every action we take, every choice we make plays an impact on how that massive flow of water is going to come down the valley in the future.”

(Zind) Some of the most important work being done to protect highways from flooding has nothing to do with the roads. It’s all about the rivers and making *them* less destructive.

While a general feeling of harmony marked much of the Irene recovery effort, it ended at the water’s edge. As they watched heavy equipment move into streams and rivers, environmentalists, anglers, some local citizens, and the state’s own biologists sounded an alarm that habitat was being destroyed and rivers made even more dangerous in future floods.

Vermont’s rivers and streams changed at time lapse speed on August 28th. For those who live on them, the view from their front doors, so fixed and familiar was now barely recognizable.

Aaron Locker runs the Vermont Foodbank’s Kingsbury farm in Waitsfield, where the Mad River peeled off a strip of land - vegetables and all.

(Aaron) “It cut about a 75-foot piece of land off. There was literally winter squash, carrot roots sticking out of the bank there.”

(Zind) With the farmland gone, the river channel is suddenly much roomier. Water resources engineer Julie Moore says letting the river keep that extra space instead of trying to reclaim it is part of the restoration work she’s doing here as a private consultant.

(Moore) “A lot of what this restoration sought to do was to respect what the river did, but at the same time try to protect the bank against future erosion.”

(Zind) Moore says different situations require different approaches, but in a spot like this doing as little as possible is the best remedy.

What’s also important is giving a river the room it needs in a flood. Digging a deeper river channel just isn’t going to work.

(Moore) “In order to make it deep enough that it doesn’t need its flood plain it would have to be hundreds of feet deep.”

(Zind) For two decades Vermont has banned the practice of taking gravel from rivers. But to speed repairs and eliminate threats to person and property in Irene’s aftermath, the state gave a green light to work in stream beds. As he traveled around after the flood, Governor Peter Shumlin explained the change.

(Shumlin) “If you need to go in, have your town road foreman call just to report in what rivers you’re going into, what sections. They’ll give you approval to do that, probably on the phone.”

(Zind) State permission involved a phone call to the Agency of Natural Resources. There were guidelines, but much of the work took place without a state inspection.

(Kilian) “I saw far more egregious images and activities and harms to our rivers in large areas of our watersheds post-Irene than I have in the entirety of the 20 years I’ve worked in this state.”

(Zind) Chris Kilian is Vermont Director of the Conservation Law Foundation. Kilian says there were places where river work had to be done to fix roads and protect people. But he says the state’s decision to give towns an oral ok to work in rivers, and then fail to monitor that work led to serious habitat destruction.

(Kilian) “Town road foremen don’t necessarily have expertise, the knowledge the skill, the job description that would lend itself to protecting a river.”

(Zind) Kilian says the state’s decision also created a Wild West atmosphere.

He says towns and private contractors took advantage of the situation to mine gravel and even log the river banks.

In the future, Kilian wants more rigorous review of emergency river work; with written requests from towns and on-site supervision.

(Mears) “The list of the things I would do differently is a long list.”

(Zind) David Mears is commissioner of the Department of Environmental Conservation. Mears says in the future the state needs a rapid response team of river experts to deploy in the field during a disaster.

(Mears) “We didn’t have that network to tap into and we needed to be able to quickly mobilize a group of people to help the communities. What you need is someone on site who understands the system and who can give supervision and guidance and we just didn’t have anything close to the capacity to do that.”

(Zind) Mears agrees damage was done to some rivers by crews who went in after Irene.

The Army Corps of Engineers is looking into some of the river work that was done, but Governor Shumlin isn’t second guessing the call to give fast oral permission to towns to go into the rivers after a disaster.

(Shumlin) “No, I think we were spot on right. We had communities totally isolated from any kind of services, any kind of vehicle, any kind of access to emergency services, food and all of the other things that we desperately needed to get back to work and we made the right call.”

(Zind) Shumlin and other state officials say the work on streams is far from over. In the spring, crews will be back in the spring to repair the damage that was done in some places.

(Zind) In other places they’ll do work to save property from future floods. They say they have a better understanding today than they once did of how to do that, but they also acknowledge that there are limits. In many places the flooding rivers have nowhere to go but into the roads.

River engineer Julie Moore says the problems we’re facing now have been a long time coming.

(Moore) “The rivers are reflecting right now our work on the landscape for the last 150 or 200 years from a time when the state was clear cut and a lot of material moved into our river valleys. And until the rivers kind of sort all of that out, its hard to predict exactly what’s going to happen.”

(Zind) Irene produced stirring accounts of people coming together. It happened in back roads neighborhoods cut off by the storm and in town centers.

Pittsfield was one of 13 Vermont towns completely isolated by Irene.

For weeks after the storm, drivers passing through Pittsfield couldn’t help but slow and gawk at the sight at the edge of the village: Three destroyed homes in an expanse of mud and sand.

A short distance from this gloomy scene there was a collection of bright hand lettered signs: “Thank you road crew”, and, “Thanks for visiting our valley”. And there were others that said simply “Thank you”. Thank you was written all over Pittsfield.

The town is small - even by Vermont standards. It’s a bedroom community with no school and few businesses. People who live there drive to Killington for work or Rutland to see a doctor or get a haircut.

The road commissioner is the town’s only full time employee.

Given these realities and the fact that for several days after the storm the town was essentially cut off from the rest of the world, Irene could easily have overwhelmed Pittsfield. It didn’t.

By early afternoon on August 28, it was clear that Irene meant business in Pittsfield.

The town’s volunteer fire department orchestrated a dramatic rescue from one inundated house. Other residents scurried to higher ground.

Down in the village town clerk Patti Haskins made the short walk from her house to the town offices to begin to deal with Irene.

(Haskins) “I remember when I was looking for my rapid response plan, my hands were shaking and I kind of said to myself, ok you’ve got to calm down.”

(Zind) Town officials gathered in the garage of a neighboring house where there was a generator.

Peter Bordon is Pittsfield Emergency Management Coordinator.

(Bordon) “I read my emergency management coordinator book twice by candlelight that night. And it worked really well we were just very well organized; Focused on communication, and let everybody in town know exactly what was going on.”

(Zind) The morning after the flood Pittsfield held the first in a long succession of informational meetings for residents.

(Haskins) “The very first meeting at the church started it out with a joke and it just set the tone. And there were serious questions asked of the town fathers and the road commissioner, but there was never any finger pointing or complaining.”

(Zind) There was a lot to deal with at those meetings and Haskins says people stepped up. Medical care was organized and there were families who needed housing.

Someone figured out how to run the gas pumps off a generator and the owners of the local store announced a rationing program.

(Man at meeting) “But we’re going to limit it to, please 5 gallon buckets, please not for your 4 wheeler to drive around in. There’s a lot of people who need their generators for medical reasons...”

(Zind) There were plenty of laughs at the meetings. A town constable took some ribbing when he kept getting curfew hours backwards. He told people to stay off the roads from sunrise to sunset, instead of the other way around.

Haskins says it was two weeks before the roads were passable enough for people to return to their outside jobs. In the meantime they went to work for the town. People volunteered as garbage collectors. When concerns were raised about all the dust being raised by equipment on the highway, a squadron of citizens armed with brooms swept it clean.

People whose homes were damaged found they hardly had to ask for help. Volunteers and equipment turned up in Marion Abrams’ driveway, sometimes unbidden.

(Abrams) “I called FEMA the first time and they said, did you have to buy anything? Did you buy a wet-vac? Did you buy a sump pump? Did you buy a generator? Well, no, my neighbors lent me all those things.”

(Zind) A school was organized on the green. There was a clinic staffed by the medical people who lived in town. Someone even started giving haircuts.

(Abrams) “This is a town that doesn’t have a school but we had a school that week. This is a town that doesn’t have a doctor in town but we had a doctor in town that week.”

(Zind) Eight families were displaced in the flood. Single mom Traci Templeton lost nearly everything in the house she rented. She says she was in shock in the days after the disaster.

(Templeton) “I could sense people mourning for me around me, yet I wasn’t able to do that myself. That’s pretty magical when your whole community feels for you when you cannot feel for yourself.”

(Man at meeting) “Okay! Everybody come have a seat so we can get started...”

(Zind) The last post-Irene town meeting was held nearly two months after the flood.

For laughs, the town constable took a page from Fiddler on the Roof to make light of his past confusion about the curfew hours.

(Constable singing) “Sunrise, sunset. Sunset, Sunrise. I can’t get it riiiiight...”

(Zind) And the final flood meeting ended on a musical note, with town clerk Patti Haskins at the church piano, leading the people of Pittsfield.

(Crowd singing ‘Goodnight Irene’)

(Zind) Life in Pittsfield has resumed its daily rhythms. People have settled back into their old routines. But Marion Abrams is convinced something is different now.

(Abrams) “I think a lot of people were changed. Even if your neighbor still ticks you off day to day, there’s that underlying knowledge that I may not like this guy but when the water was coming up he showed up at my door and helped me out. And when that sits under everything else, I think it’s got to change things. A lot of people have said, ‘I would never leave this town, now, because I know I’m safe here.’”

(Zind) Pittsfield wasn’t alone. Other communities discovered something about themselves in the wake of Irene.

We often measure the vitality of our small towns by dwindling numbers at town meetings, waning interest civic participation and darkened general stores. Perhaps these things are true but Irene has given us a new measure and we find that when our community and our neighbors need help our little towns are still remarkably strong.

Floods are an inevitable and regular part of life. Every year they cost Vermonters about \$14 million. Most of them are nameless footnotes.

The flood of August 28th has a name, and far from being a footnote, Irene is a saga that’s still being written.

This is what we do know:

FEMA has distributed \$20 million in emergency assistance to Vermonters hurt by the storm. On top of that at least \$7 million has been raised locally. Many displaced families are back in their homes, but months after the storm there *are* Vermonters still in limbo, waiting for answers and help.

Among the phrases that crept into our daily conversations in the past few months was one about ‘making people whole again’.

We’ve learned there is no making some people whole after Irene. Certainly not those who lost loved ones. Not those like Jim Wilson for whom the financial losses mean a less secure future.

And we know this:

Towns like Wilmington and Waterbury are still tallying Irene’s bill. Questions remain about how long it will take before life feels normal again and how big the hit will be on budgets and tax rates. On a deeper level Irene has changed the character of some communities.

The question that hangs over all that’s been done is whether we’ll be better off when the next Irene hits.

We know some roads and bridges have been put back better than Irene found them and that more work on highways and rivers lies ahead.

The FEMA buyout process underway now will likely prevent dozens of places from being built on and flooded again, and towns will look at future development through the lens of the Irene experience. But Traci Towne plans to return to her old mobile home park, and others are rebuilding in flooded areas.

So while much is being done to better prepare, we can’t be completely protected.

Our villages, the roads that connect them and our most fertile farmland lie in the valleys which will continue to be reshaped by the power of the water when the rivers run high.

For Vermont Public Radio, I’m Steve Zind.

The Irene Effect was written and produced by Steve Zind and Lynne McCrea.

Chris Albertine was the engineer. The music is by Tyler Gibbons. The song, ‘Irene’ is by Naomi Koliba and Liza Mackay.

The Executive Producer was John Van Hoesen.