



AN UPDATE FROM THE MAYOR

The last six months have been extremely frustrating for your Town Council and Staff as we are trying to recover from Hurricane Helene. Our frustrations stem from dealing with federal and state governments. Allow me to provide a couple of examples.

WHITE PINE DRIVE IN FRONT OF TOWN HALL

The culvert under White Pine washed away and was destroyed. This is one of the few roads in Town owned by NCDOT. Therefore, it is their responsibility to repair this road. Within two weeks after the storm, NCDOT temporarily repaired the culvert and backfilled the roadway. They did not compact the backfill or install headwalls to divert water into the culvert. When Town officials asked NCDOT, we were advised that they would be back after the other emergency repairs in Western North Carolina were addressed which might be two years. While our Town could backfill these holes, we will not be reimbursed for any work that we do on NCDOT roads.

EDGE OF ROADWAY ON LAUREL PARK HIGHWAY NEAR RANSIER

The storm created very deep edges on many of our roadways which threaten the integrity of our recently paved roads; not to mention the safety of drivers and their vehicles. Whereas our Town Council and staff deem this an emergency, FEMA and the NC Emergency Management Department (NCEM) do not and will not approve funding for these repairs. Because of this, reimbursement for these repairs was denied.

PROCEDURES FOR DEBRIS REMOVAL

We all want to see our neighborhoods cleaned up as soon as possible. To receive 100% reimbursement, we must follow the FEMA and NCEM guidelines. The prescribed sequence of events is:

1. Open roadways for emergency vehicles, even if only one lane.
2. Open roadways for traffic, hopefully two lanes.
3. Removal of green debris on Right of Way.
4. Removal of debris on private property.
5. Removal of storm debris from destroyed property.

Henderson County has removed over 500,000 cubic yards of green debris to date. They are only 35% complete and anticipate that they will not be complete until this time next year. At that time, we could expect storm debris removal to conclude.

FUNDING

Laurel Park was the first community in all Western North Carolina to meet with FEMA and NCEM. We anticipate our costs for permanent repairs to exceed \$10 million dollars. The only funding available now is a zero percent loan which we received on March 13th. The State sent us \$1.5 million dollars. At this point, we welcome any type of cash flow. Without outside funding, the Town's recovery will be extremely slow and limited.

PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE PROPERTY

Damage occurred to public and private property. Immediately after the storm, our police department, staff, and engineers began surveying, mapping, and photographing areas affected including many private properties. With this information we were prepared to meet with FEMA and NCEM in November. At that time, we were told that our public assistance request could not include private property emergency repairs. In February we were informed that private roads and bridges may be included. At the deadline for application, March 12th, the inclusion of private roads and bridges was still not clarified and has not been approved yet. We met the public infrastructure reporting deadline of March 12th.

WHERE WE ARE NOW AND WHAT TO EXPECT

The \$10 million dollar problem is huge especially considering our annual operating budget is approximately \$4.5 million dollars. We must abide by FEMA and NCEM regulations or we will jeopardize our funding request. We only have a loan at this point. We are hopeful that the loan will turn into a grant, but we are not in control of that. As much as we want to return to normal, we must be careful and patient. Let us be thankful that no lives were lost unlike so many communities in the region. Laurel Park was certainly devastated by Hurricane Helene but not to the extent Hickory Nut Gorge, Bat Cave, Lake Lure, Marshall, Hot Springs, and Swannanoa were.

The Town's roadway improvements budget is currently about \$1.5 million. Until we complete the edge of roadway improvements, we should not pave. Any reimbursement from the upper levels of government is expected to be an average of 650 days, 2 years. We cannot float funds for that long. Subsequently, we have suspended roadway improvements until we have a better understanding of reimbursement. This may appear as somber news. Disasters like this are new to us but not to FEMA. Your Town Council is making prudent decisions. Our budget reserve is currently \$3 million dollars. Aside from Hurricane Helene's impact and anticipated repairs, the Town of Laurel Park is in a great position. We urge all residents to please be patient as we unravel this difficult dilemma to repair our beautiful Town.

TO END ON A POSITIVE NOTE

We are in our Centennial year; 100 years since our incorporation. Many events are planned to celebrate this wonderful milestone. Please join us for our historic tours, scavenger hunt, July 5th picnic and other activities. Please stop by town hall or visit our website for further information.

Thank you!

Carey O'Cain, Mayor