

## New help for Vt communities crippled by Irene

By Keith McGilvery



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Tropical Storm Irene ripped through Vermont, leaving hundreds of millions of dollars worth of damage in her wake.

"We had multiple roads simply removed from the map, rivers extended their banks and took the roads out to the cliff edges or just removed them in hollows," said Christina Moore, the Irene recovery chief for Halifax.

The small town of Halifax is tackling a huge bill. Repair work from the storm is slated to cost roughly \$7 million. That's more than eight times the community's annual \$800,000 budget.

"We are in a position of having to borrow money, look for bonds and try to cover these expenses as we go into snow season and have to try and plow these mountain dirt roads that we live on," Moore said.

Monday, state legislators joined treasurer Beth Pearce to announce a plan to help cities and towns rebound. This week the state will release \$6.4 million in local highway aid that was originally scheduled to go out in January, and \$125 million in education payments slated to go out in December will also be distributed before Thanksgiving.

"It is very important that towns maintain that cash flow so that the work continues to get done at the local level and the other things that we do on a normal day-to-day basis get done as well," said Steven Jeffrey of the Vt. League of Cities and Towns.

The state treasurer says towns may also defer a portion of their education payments up to the amount of their disaster reimbursement claims from Dec. 1 of this year to Feb. 28 of next year.

"The state has exercised prudent financial management over the years. We came into this year in a good cash position and because of that we are able to do the types of things that we are doing in terms of cash flow," said Pearce, D-Vermont.

Halifax leaders expect to be stuck with \$800,000 in bills after all of their reimbursements come in and will most likely use a bond to pay them off. They say the help from Montpelier will give them a little extra breathing room as they tackle their bills one at a time.

"There is a stack of paper with all of their bills in front of us. Patty needs to find the cash and I need to organize it for FEMA, so if we don't keep going, ambulances can't travel, fire trucks can't move, people can't get to their jobs; it's our jobs, it's what we do, we have to do it," Moore said.

State lawmakers will have to officially sign off on the education payment deferrals when they meet in the new year. Tuesday, House and Senate Leadership formally backed the move.

