

# HELENE: A YEAR LATER

## INSIDE

Word cloud .....	H4
Those we lost .....	H6-10
Their stories .....	H11-16
Guest columns .....	H17-19
Response/recovery .....	H20-27
Timeline .....	H28-32
Rebuild/resiliency .....	H34-38
Health .....	H39-40
Environment .....	H41-47
Business .....	H48-50
Legal issues .....	H51-53
How to help .....	H54



## HELENE: WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

*'President Trump cares deeply about all those impacted by Hurricane Helene. That's why one of his first priorities as President was taking action to help individuals impacted that had been ignored for far too long. President Trump will always stand by the American people in the good times and the bad.'*

— Abigail Jackson, a spokeswoman with the White House, told Six Rivers Media



Trump

*'Hurricane Helene was an unprecedented disaster for our state, and one year later, many Tennesseans remain forever changed by the loss of life and severe flood damage. In the midst of unimaginable tragedy, we saw the very best of Tennessee as first responders, law enforcement, road crews, and volunteers stepped up to serve their neighbors. The Volunteer Spirit is alive and well, and Maria and I continue to keep these communities in our prayers.'*

— Gov. Bill Lee told Six Rivers Media



Lee

*'One year ago, Hurricane Helene devastated communities in Tennessee, leaving families without homes, businesses destroyed, and lives forever changed. In the year since Helene, everyone from first responders to neighbors to church groups have stepped up in remarkable ways to help our communities rebuild. The Volunteer Spirit has brought people in Upper East Tennessee together despite this awful tragedy, and I will continue to fight to ensure Tennesseans have every resource they need to recover from the disaster.'*

— Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-TN, told Six Rivers Media



Blackburn

*'As we approach the one-year anniversary of Helene, we remember the lives lost and the families forever changed. We also reflect on the progress Northeast Tennessee has made since this tragedy. Thanks to the tireless work of our first responders, local leaders, volunteers, state agencies and churches, who stepped up immediately to do what needed to be done, critical infrastructure is being repaired, homes rebuilt, and small businesses reopened. While there is still a long road ahead, the progress we see today is proof of our resilience and determination to come back stronger than ever.'*

— Congresswoman Diana Harshbarger, R-TN, told Six Rivers Media



Harshbarger

# Looking back on the storm that shocked our community

By SETH HARRELL  
sharrell@sixriversmedia.com

Helene struck our region and surrounding communities one year ago. What came as a surprise event for many caused irreparable damage to surrounding homes, schools and bridges.

From record-breaking wind gusts to some of the highest recorded floods, these are facts and information about the storm, answering the how and why such a storm was able to break through into our region, with information to keep safe next time.

## QUICK FACTS

- Sept. 22 — A tropical body that would become known as Helene began to develop in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Sept. 26 — The storm had grown into a Category Four hurricane while making landfall in Perry, Florida.
- The storm was able to travel the Sunshine State's "Big Bend" region, continuing into central Georgia.
- After being downgraded to tropical storm status, Helene would move into Tennessee and North Carolina.
- According to the Tennessee Climate Office and the National Hurricane Center, over 100,000 reports of power outages were reported, four wastewater treatment plants impacted, 20 drinking water facilities impacted, five counties issued boil water advisories and 134 deaths occurred across our region in Tennessee, Virginia and North Carolina.

The highest record of rainfall in Kingsport was 7.16 inches and the highest in Tennessee was 10.98 inches in the Trade community of Johnson County. The highest rainfall coming from Transylvania County in North Carolina, with 33.08 inches of rain.

The highest record of rainfall in Kingsport was 7.16 inches and the highest in Tennessee was 10.98 inches in the Trade community of Johnson County. The highest rainfall coming from Transylvania County in North Carolina, with 33.08 inches of rain.

## HOW THE STORM RAVAGED OUR REGION

Areas such as Unicoi County experienced extreme flash flooding. This is in part to a rain storm that

made contact with the area days before Helene. Given the previous rain storm leaving above average moisture levels in the area, Helene was able to "work" its way into the region.

"The frontal weather system right before Helene primed the area, wet the soil, dumped rain, working together to bring much higher than usual rainfall," said Dr. Andrew Joyner, a member of the Tennessee Climate Office and an associate professor of climatology at East Tennessee State University.

Helene had more than double the average "flow rate," which is the volume of water moving past a specific point in a given time. "It was overwhelming, causing a 1 in 1,000 year event," Joyner said.

Industrial debris across the region moved quickly. Even as certain water levels returned to normal, debris dams broke away in the area. This caused damages not only to the land and surrounding homes, but also to bridges and other region-wide infrastructure.

## FUTURE STORM PREPARATION

The Tennessee Climate Office, ETSU Department of Geoscience and the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency are currently working together on a statewide weather analysis project. The new system will help create plans for future hazard preparation across the region.

The American Red Cross offers hurricane and other storm preparedness and safety information, including a new emergency application for iPhone and Android. For more information, visit [redcross.org](https://www.redcross.org).

TEMA suggests that each family create a personal emergency plan, while having enough supplies such as medication and pet supplies on hand. To learn more about future preparedness, visit [ready.gov](https://www.ready.gov).



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER

# Not Forgotten

## A year later, victims' stories define Helene's aftermath

By **CLIFF HIGHTOWER**  
chightower@sixriversmedia.com

Samantha Honeycutt stood in Embreeville United Methodist Church a year ago.

Floodwaters from the Nolichucky River had surged over the banks, leaving behind silt, mud and remnants of homes that once stood within eye-shot of the edges of the water.

Honeycutt worked 13 hours a day at a donation hub, dealing with the aftermath of a 10,000-year storm. Helene had come and gone.

It left behind tears and sadness. It left behind survivors who banded together as some communities found themselves cut off from the world.

"They can't forget us," Honeycutt told Six Rivers Media a year ago.

The toll of the storm in Northeast Tennessee left 10 dead and one missing. Reminders of the storm still haunt the Northeast Tennessee landscape as bridges and roads still get repaired and opened.

Parts of the Nolichucky River now run wider than before Helene roared



GRACE TEATER/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Anthony "Toney" Davis (right) and his wife Anna Palmer (left) stand in front of their home near the Nolichucky River a year ago after Helene ravaged the area. Parts of the Nolichucky River now run wider than before Helene roared through the area.**

*'This is going to be a tragedy that will last a few good years.'*

— Samantha Honeycutt

through the area, dropping more than 20 inches of rain on Mt. Mitchell in western North Carolina that fed the rivers and streams

running into Unicoi and Washington counties.

Roan Mountain produced a deluge of water that flowed in Carter County, and

Johnson County saw its banks run over from water that flooded North Carolina and the Virginia Highlands.

Jobs were lost. Businesses were lost. Bridges and roads were lost.

The largest impact was lives lost, such as Steven Cloyd, who tried to rescue his dog

but was found dead eight months later. Or Sibrina Barnett, who was swept away by the Nolichucky River while at her job at Impact Plastics in Erwin.

There were stories told a year ago. Stories such as 50 people trapped on the roof of the Unicoi County Hospital, who



To view the video report, scan this QR code.

found themselves airlifted out by the National Guard. Stories such as

Antioch Baptist Church in Mountain City that saw its church swept away and destroyed, only to find them rebuilding it one year later.

Abby Burgner saw her house disappear in Bumpus Cove and still wakes up in the middle of the night, feeling water that is not there squeezing her legs. A reminder of when the flood washed away her home and she fought with her family to survive.

Honeycutt stood in the church a year ago. She collected donations and gave them to flood survivors, forcing it in their hands, even if they didn't ask for it.

Because they needed it.

Honeycutt said words that still haunt.

"This is going to be a tragedy that will last a few good years," she said.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER

# What word or phrase comes to mind when you think of Helene?



The Kingsport Times News and Johnson City Press asked their Facebook followers for a word or phrase that comes to mind when they think of Helene. This word cloud was created with more than 75 of their responses.





Photo | Angel Duncan, NFS Employee

Friends and neighbors,

As we approach the first anniversary of Hurricane Helene's devastating impact on our community, we must honor those we lost and those who showed tremendous courage in the face of the storm's wrath.

Events like Hurricane Helene remind us that we are part of a community that chooses to stand together, even in the most challenging moments.

We came together across yards, churches, schools, and shops—sharing meals, lending a hand, and listening to one another.

In that same spirit, we all work to restore our community with the steady, daily acts of care that bind us.

The recovery and restoration is a long journey, but one that we will complete together.

**Ron Dailey**

President, BWXT Nuclear Fuel Services





## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | THOSE WE LOST

## 'Just the guy he was'

## Teammates, family help Peterson cope with loss of father from Helene

By **JEFF BIRCHFIELD**  
jbirchfield@sixriversmedia.com

ERWIN — Gunner Peterson keeps relying on his football family and his actual family to help him through the most challenging time of his life.

Peterson is coping with the loss of his father, Johnny, who died trying to save co-workers from the raging Helene flood waters last September.

Johnny Peterson, 55, was one of the Impact Plastics workers in Erwin swept away in the Sept. 27 floodwaters.

The Unicoi County football team truly has been family for the junior quarterback.

"There's nothing short of a family here," Peterson said. "A lot of my buddies, we grew up playing flag football, we played middle school ball, and then now we're here. We're all here for each other, and it's magnificent what we have here."

His teammates and coaches offered support in any way they could after the tragic loss. Peterson reflected on how everyone from head coach Drew Rice to the players around his age truly showed the



CONTRIBUTED

**Johnny Peterson was an avid outdoorsman who enjoyed hunting, fishing and golf.**



JEFF BIRCHFIELD / SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Quarterback Gunner Peterson is a key member of the Unicoi County football team.**

Peterson got the opportunity to show how much he'd learned in the first round of last year's TSSAA playoffs when starting quarterback Kolby Jones missed the game with an injury. He responded by completing 14 of 17 passes for 216 yards and four touchdowns to lead the Blue Devils to a 56-16 shellacking of Union County.

"It was just going in the game and showing the coaches what I had, where it was my first game," Peterson said. "I'd say a lot of our fans thought with my first start, it was probably going to be kind of iffy. I was nervous, but I just went and showed them what I could do. I did the best of my ability to help our team win that game and move on to the next one."

Obviously, Peterson has some of the same characteristics of his father in thinking about others. Every time he takes the field, there is also a remembrance of the man who shared that love of the game.

"Everything I really do now on this football team, and as a person in general, it's dedicated to him," Peterson said. "How I do the things that I do is because the way he raised me. I hope he's proud of me, and everything I'm doing, it's in his honor."

## Flood fatalities from Helene

## UNICOI COUNTY FLOOD VICTIMS

- Monica Hernandez Corona, 44
- Johnny Peterson, 55
- Lidia Verdugo-Gastelum, 63
- Sibrina Barnett, 53
- Bertha Mendoza, 56
- Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso, 29

## WASHINGTON COUNTY FLOOD VICTIMS

- Steven Cloyd, 60
- Jimmy Tucker, 76 (Tucker's wife, Nancy, is still missing.)
- Russell Wilbur, 66

## JOHNSON COUNTY VICTIMS

- Claude Dean Brewer, 74

compassion when he needed it the most.

"A lot of my friends were there. They come and saw me," Peterson said. "Coach Rice gave me the ability to take the time off I needed. All the other coaches

reached out to me, and it just showed what we have here, how this football team is, how Unicoi County is as a whole."

Peterson most leaned on his immediate family. His siblings helped him and con-

tinue to help him throughout the grief process. He grew closer to his older sisters than ever before.

"When something like that happens to your family, the closest thing you have is your family," Peterson said. "My sisters and me, we stuck together and we got through it. It was live with each other, reach out and spend some time with each other. You try to get your mind off of it and have fun with your family."

They're all able to take some solace that their dad died a hero, paying the ultimate sacrifice with his attempt to save others. A resolution passed by the Tennessee General Assembly memorialized

Johnny Peterson for "his uncommon heroism and selfless concern for others."

"That was just the guy he was growing up with him," Gunner said. "That showed who he was, and he was a great guy, a great dad. We played golf in the summer, we fished a lot and when hunting season came around, it was hunting, hunting, hunting. But if we found something new to do, we'd go do it."

They also loved watching football together as Gunner became a loyal University of Tennessee Vols and Seattle Seahawks fan. His dad would point out things in the college and pro contests to help Gunner improve his game.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | THOSE WE LOST

# Remembering the life of Lidia Verdugo-Gastelum in Erwin

By **KIMBERLY HARR**  
kharr@sixriversmedia.com

Lidia Verdugo-Gastelum was one of six Impact Plastics employees who lost their lives during Helene on Sept. 27, 2024.

Search and rescue operations by multiple agencies combed the building and surrounding region, which had been flooded by several feet of rushing water.

Crews recovered Verdugo-Gastelum's body during the first week following the disaster and identified her at the William Jenkins Forensic Center in Johnson City. Her death was officially recorded as Friday, Oct. 4, 2024, resulting from



PHOTO FROM LEGACY.COM

**Lidia Verdugo-Gastelum**

the flooding in Erwin.

A visitation service for family and friends was held at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Parish, where Verdugo-Gastelum was an active member, on Friday, Oct. 18, 2024, followed by a funeral mass on Saturday, Oct. 19, 2024. She was laid to rest at Evergreen Cemetery in Erwin.

According to her obit-

uary at Vallery Funeral Home in Erwin, she was 63 years old, born Aug. 3, 1961, in Etchojoa, Sonora, Mexico. The obituary described her as "a radiant soul who brought joy and laughter to everyone around her."

"Lidia was known for her infectious sense of humor and her passion for life," the obituary states. "She cherished every moment spent with her grandchildren, often filling their days with laughter and joy. Her playful spirit and warm heart created lasting memories that will be treasured forever."

She was the daughter of the late Lazaro Verdugo and Elvira Gastelum. She is sur-



BRANDON SMITH/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**The families of Sibrina Barnett, Monica Hernandez Corona, Lidia Verdugo-Gastelum, Bertha Mendoza, Johnny Peterson and Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso attended a press conference on Sept. 29, 2024, at Unicoi County High School, saying their loved ones are missing. Several family members held up images in the hopes that someone would recognize them. In the images from left to right: Lidia Verdugo-Gastelum, Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso and Monica Hernandez Corona.**

vived by her husband, Fernando Ruiz Valencia; siblings

Lorenia Gastelum Campoy, Juan Verdugo Gastelum, Lazaro

Verdugo Gastelum, and Alejandro Verdugo Gastelum; children Fernando Ruiz Verdugo, Roman Ruiz Verdugo, Isabel Ruiz Verdugo, and Dulce Ruiz Vega; and grandchildren Juan Antonio Roman Ruiz, Hector Ramon Vega Ruiz, Axel Emmanuel Vega Ruiz, Fernanda Ruiz-Yin, Jessica Valeria Ruiz-Yin, Jesus Ruiz-Yin, Fernando Ruiz-Yin, Arianny Ruiz Diaz and Kevin Ruiz.

Efforts to contact her family and friends through St. Michael the Archangel Parish, as well as through online channels, were unsuccessful. The Rev. Tom Charters of the parish said he could not speak on the behalf of the family.

# Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso survived by husband, 2 children

By **RICK WAGNER**  
rwagner@sixriversmedia.com

ERWIN — Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso was the sixth and final Impact Plastics employee drowning victim recovered after the Sept. 27, 2024, flooding.

Her body was found more than a month after the Sept. 27 storm caused Unicoi County flooding that also hit elsewhere in Northeast Tennessee, Western North Carolina and parts of far Southwest Virginia.

Her obituary on Legacy.com states the

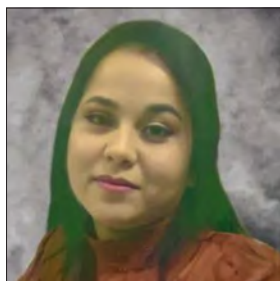


PHOTO FROM LEGACY.COM

**Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso**

29-year-old of Erwin "passed away on Wednesday, October 30, 2024 in the flooding resulting from Hurricane Helene." Her body was recovered Oct. 30 and identified Oct. 31.

The mother of two

was found just after the official emergency responders' search for the body ceased. Officials said she was found under debris. She was buried almost two months after the flood, leaving a grieving family, including both parents, her husband and two young children.

A GoFundMe for her family raised \$18,828 before it was paused by a cousin who created the fundraiser.

The other five Impact employees who died were Sibrina Barnett, Monica Hernandez Corona,

Bertha Mendoza, Johnny Peterson and Lidia Verdugo-Gastelum.

The six were among a group of about 10 Impact employees who tried to ride out the flooding on the back of a flatbed trailer loaded with plastic pipe. However, flood-driven debris from the swollen Nolichucky River struck the tractor trailer and truck multiple times, eventually flipping the trailer and plunging the group of 10 into the water.

"On Sept. 27, Rosa showed up to work to provide for her family

and children as she normally would, but unfortunately, she never made it back home," according to the GoFundMe post set up by Anabel Andrade, a cousin.

Priest Tom Charters, along with Andrade, the cousin who set up the GoFundMe, said they reached out to the widow about a request for an interview by a newspaper reporter. Both said they could not speak for the family without permission.

The victim was a native of Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico.

The daughter of Juan Andrade Meza and Eleticia Reynoso Razo, Rosa was a member of Saint Michaels the Archangel Catholic Parish.

"Rosa was a wonderful daughter, very good mother and a loving wife. She went above and beyond to care for and provide for her children. Rosa loved the river, the mountains and enjoyed listening to music," her obituary states.

She is buried in the Evergreen Cemetery, which has a sweeping view of Unicoi County mountains.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | THOSE WE LOST

# Sister remembers Erwin flood victim Sibrina Barnett

By **REBEKAH MCNERNEY**  
rmcnerney@sixriversmedia.com

**ERWIN** — When Helene's floodwaters hit Erwin on Sept. 27, 2024, Sibrina Barnett was among the six workers at Impact Plastics who did not make it home.

Eight days later, the 53-year-old's body was recovered.

For her sister, Karen Jianniney, the loss still feels impossible.

"It's been the hardest thing for our dad and myself to come to terms with," Jianniney said. "I mean what else can you say, it just blows my mind."

Jianniney, who lives in Maryland, recalled the moment she first saw Helene's arrival to Tennessee.

"I was watching the hospital in Erwin flood on TV, and I just got this sinking feeling in my



**Barnett**

chest, like something wasn't right. I sent my sister a message saying

'Hey, I'm just checking in. I just wanted to see how you are, and I love you.' But the message turned green, and I thought 'how odd.'"

At the time, Jianniney didn't know her sister was employed just eight miles down the road at Impact Plastics, a manufacturing company.

"A couple hours later, my daughter Jyssa called me to tell me what happened and that she suspected she was missing from the flooding," Jianniney recalled. "I'm not gonna

lie, I knew right then she was gone. I literally felt it."

One of her fears, Jianniney said, was her sister never being found.

"I was scared that they weren't going to find her body," she said. "I remember my dad was determined to go down there and search for her."

"I was on the phone telling him, 'Dad, you can't. They're not gonna let you in there.' And they stopped him before he got down in there. He was so upset."

Jianniney said she remembers her sister as a dedicated and hard worker, especially when it came to her 21-year-old son, Caiman.

"She worked her fingers to the bone to make sure he had the life that she wanted him to have," Jianniney said.

That meant long hours, often taking on cleaning jobs, including subcontracting work at Impact Plastics.

"She was always working," Jianniney said. "And then she'd turn around and tell me I needed to slow down."

As the youngest in the family, Jianniney recalled how when they were children, Barnett often tagged along, eager to do whatever her older sister was doing.

"She was my shadow," Jianniney said.

"Everywhere I went, she wanted to go. Even if I told her no, I'd turn around and there she was, right behind me."

"She was definitely a mama's girl. She was a fun kid, she loved getting into things."

Their parents divorced when the sisters were young, with Barnett

going to live with their mother, and Jianniney with their father.

"I missed her terribly when we were apart," she said.

As sisters who lived far away from each other, Jianniney said each summer she would make the eight-hour drive south, and the sisters would gather with their father in Tennessee.

They went to Gatlinburg, splashed through water parks and made time to sit down for dinner together.

"We just had fun," Jianniney said. "We made the most of the time we had."

In the weeks that followed Barnett's death, family members of the Impact Plastics employees in Erwin held a candlelight service for the workers who died.

When Jianniney saw the ceremony online, she realized no one from her family had known about it.

"They included her picture, even though none of us were there," she said. "That touched my heart, that somebody stood in for us."

Jianniney plans to return to Tennessee this fall to mark the anniversary and lay flowers for her sister. She wants people to remember Barnett as a hard worker and someone who had a fierce love for her family.

"She loved everybody," Jianniney said. "She'll always be remembered for that, and for giving her all to the people she loved most."

## Steven Cloyd finally found eight months later

By **ROBERT HOUK**  
rhok@sixriversmedia.com

Steven Cloyd has been found.

It took almost eight months from the day he went missing. But crews working to remove debris along State Route 107 discovered one of the two last remaining people to go missing from Washington County.

Washington County Sheriff Keith Sexton said deputies and rescue workers tried



**Cloyd**

as hard as they could to find him. But with devastation every-

where after the flooding, it proved difficult.

"We actually dug by hand whenever we saw a roof of a car sticking up," Sexton said. "We used shovels to dig the car out to where we

could see into the passenger compartment to make sure there was no one in it. There were so many feet of just sand and silt."

Cloyd, who was 60, left his home on Charlie Carson Road on the day of the flood in his Jeep Wrangler with his dog.

His dog was later found alive. His Jeep, though, was among the more than 400 vehicles recovered from the floodwaters in Washington County,

buried under silt and mud.

Nancy Tucker is still missing.

She and her husband, Jimmy, were in their home on Title Circle in Washington County when towering floodwaters from the Nolichucky River swept it away. Both were 76 years old.

Sexton said Jimmy Tucker's body was recovered by a search team from Dayton on Sept. 30 in a field near Highway 107.

"The water receded really quickly, within 24 hours to where we could start a good search and rescue effort," Sexton said, "but there was so much mud and silt."

Nancy Tucker is the only Washington County resident still unaccounted for from the devastating flood.

"At this point her family would like to have some closure," Sexton said. "We continue to follow up on every lead. We

haven't forgotten."

Cloyd and the Tuckers are among the four Washington County residents who died in the flood. The sheriff said Jerry Hunter, 77, was found Sept. 29 in a tree near A.J. Willis Road, just a short distance from his home on Ol Huff Road.

Sexton said there were more than 40 people reported missing along the Nolichucky River in the days following the flood.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | THOSE WE LOST

# More than a mother: Family remembers Bertha Mendoza

By **ALLISON WINTERS**  
awinters@sixriversmedia.com

**ERWIN** — Guillermo Mendoza said September was usually a time of celebration for his family.

Mendoza, his mother, son and younger brother all celebrate September birthdays. He and his wife, Estrella Mendoza, will celebrate their 12-year wedding anniversary Sept. 27, 2025 — the same day Helene changed his family forever.

It was that day Guillermo Mendoza lost his mother, Bertha Mendoza, 56, who was one of the deaths in Unicoi County from flooding. Guillermo Mendoza said his mother loved to cook and bake, and would especially do so around the holidays.

“A lot of my good memo-

ries with my family are around the kitchen table, breaking bread and sharing stories and remembering what had happened or something,” he said. “Any type of festival thing, mom would make tamales.”

Guillermo Mendoza said last year his mother surprised the family with tamales in September. It would be the last time they would get to enjoy her cooking together. He called it a blessing to be able to gather one last time and celebrate, even if they didn’t know it at the time.

“She said, ‘I just wanted to do something really nice for you guys this year, and we’re going to celebrate together as a family,’” Guillermo Mendoza said. “So in a way, it was very meaningful, because — and

I’m sorry if I get emotional — that was the last time.”

But Guillermo Mendoza said his mother made other great foods like mole and homemade tortillas.

Bertha Mendoza would make the tortillas with her children — which he described as one of his best memories of his mom.

“To this day, my kids absolutely miss that,” Guillermo Mendoza said. “My aunt, who thankfully, is doing well and lived through that experience, sometimes we go visit her and she also makes tortillas. My kids would say, ‘Hey, these taste just like abuelita’s tortillas.’ Of course they’re enjoying it, but we’re over here in the background crying.”

See **MENDOZA**, Page H10



CONTRIBUTED

Bertha and Elias I. Mendoza pose for a photo with their grandson Gabriel.

## ‘Kind and caring:’ Remembering Charlene, Russell Wilber after Helene

By **REBEKAH MCNERNEY**  
rmcnerney@sixriversmedia.com

**TELFORD** — When Charlene and Russell Wilber moved to Tennessee in the mid-2000s, they quickly found a sense of community.

The couple was drawn to the state by its slower pace of life and the kindness of their neighbors, their daughter Amy Crosswhite said.

“They loved being together and building a life around family and work,” Crosswhite said.

Last September, their lives were cut short when flooding from Helene swept through

East Tennessee and Western North Carolina.

The Wilbers, who lived in Telford, were camping at Buck Hill Campground in North Carolina when Helene made its arrival. The couple were among those caught in the floodwaters.

The body of Charlene, 70, was recovered in October 2024 near the Ingalls community. Russell, 66, was not located until six months later along the North Toe River. The two were found about 500 yards apart.

Russell, known to some as “Russ,” owned C&R Painting and Remodeling — named for Charlene and Russell — while

Charlene managed the books and the front office.

“My mother was a talker,” Crosswhite said. “She didn’t know a stranger. She’d go with him to jobs, just chatting with the homeowners while he worked.”

Their home became a hub for friends, employees and neighbors. Charlene loved to cook and entertain, and both she and Russell were quick to step in when someone needed help.

“They were just very kind and caring people,” Crosswhite said.

See **WILBERS**, Page H10



CONTRIBUTED

Charlene and Russell Wilber died in flooding from Helene.



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER | THOSE WE LOST

## MENDOZA

From Page H9

### A MOTHER'S LOVE

Another memory Guillermo Mendoza reflected on was his mother's support getting him through college. He said at the time he needed a laptop to get through school, which he knew his family could not afford — not until his mother came up with a plan to purchase one.

"I was sharing my frustrations with my mom while she was cooking or washing the dishes when she said, 'Son, I don't want you to worry about that. I will handle that,'" Guillermo Mendoza said. "I said, 'Mom, I don't want you to.' She said, 'Don't worry. I'm going to make cakes.'"

Guillermo Mendoza said his mother baked cakes often, not as a full-time job, but to help the family when needed. She would usually bake a tres leches cake, which Guillermo Mendoza said she was good at making.

"I said, 'Mom, I don't want you to do this on my behalf. I know we're going through some tough times.' But she said, 'No, let me handle this. I can help with this,'" Guillermo Mendoza said. "And I would see her make cakes, fully knowing that that was going to go for my laptop. Sure enough, she bought me a laptop."

He said even though the laptop no longer works, he has kept it for the sentimental value. Guillermo Mendoza said because of his mother's support, she was able to see him graduate with bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees.

"It's because of her that I

## Memorial services

*Memorial and other services are scheduled across the region for those lost last year during Helene. From city-wide events, to specific church and organizational services, see below for details:*

### MOUNTAIN CITY AND JOHNSON COUNTY

A candlelight observation will be held at 6:15 p.m., Wednesday, Sept. 24, at First United Methodist Church, located at 128 N. Church St., Mountain City.

A community gathering will be held 5-8 p.m. On Friday, Sept. 26, at Ralph Stout Park.

First Christian Church in Mountain City, located at 401 W. Main St., will host a community prayer breakfast and Cunningham Park Heritage Oak tree dedication celebration at 9 a.m. Saturday, Sept. 27

### ERWIN AND UNICOI COUNTY

The First Baptist Church of Erwin will hold a special prayer vigil at 3:30 p.m. Sept. 27 at 200 Love St.

### JONESBOROUGH AND WASHINGTON COUNTY

The Washington County Long Term Recovery Group will sponsor "A Day When Reflection Gives Way to Hope" event. The event will be held at 4 p.m. Sept. 27 at the Farm at Jackson Bridge, located at 1090 Taylor Bridge Road in Jonesborough.

have an education, that I have a career, because she wanted that for me," Guillermo Mendoza said. "Reflecting on it, sometimes I do get still emotional, just because it might not sound like a big thing, a laptop, but she saw the importance of it and the importance to my success."

### FROM HER HUSBAND

Elias Mendoza, Bertha Mendoza's husband of 38 years, said one of his favorite memories is taking her out to eat. He said he loved taking her to some of her favorite restaurants, like Texas Roadhouse and LongHorn Steakhouse.

The two also loved to go on trips to Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge to spend time together. He said they would walk around holding hands, enjoying each other's company.

"Those are memories that will never fade," Elias Mendoza said.

He said it can be hard to

still visit those places without her, especially watching others there with their families or significant others.

"Going to Dollywood or Pigeon Forge, when I see couples holding hands or being with their family, being with their spouse, it grieves me a little bit and makes me miss her," Elias Mendoza said.

As her husband, Elias Mendoza described Bertha as a great daughter, partner, mother and grandmother.

"Any time we would get together, it would be a celebration," he said. "There were no worries, it was all about fellowship. Everything was laughter, a very family oriented and united family atmosphere."

He described the story of whisking Bertha away to get married. While culturally it is usually common for the groom to take the bride away on horseback,

Elias Mendoza said he couldn't afford a horse — so they left on a bike together.

That bike can still be seen on the streets of Mexico, he said.

### COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Guillermo Mendoza currently serves as the chief of staff at Northeast State Community College, minister to students at First Baptist Church in Erwin and as member of the Unicoi County School Board.

He said the outpouring of support from the community is part of the reason he serves in so many roles around the region as a way to give back.

"With the community, I can't express enough gratitude for the amount of support from our church, from even the school system to organizations," he said. "I was shocked, in a way, to see how much support, not just financially, but emotionally and spiritually we received during such a devastating time where we didn't even know how to react, how to feel, how to process."

He said he would be lying if he claimed he was doing "100% OK" and that he and his family have moved forward, but he did say their faith in Christ has helped along the journey.

"I say that not just to sound religious or because I'm a youth pastor, it's because we have experienced it firsthand," Guillermo Mendoza said. "With the help of the community, in every aspect, we have seen God's hand, we have seen and felt the comfort of that and we know we have this peace in our heart that we know where mom is."

## WILBERS

From Page H9

Outside of work, the Wilbers' favorite pastime was NASCAR. Every year, they attended races in Bristol, bringing their camper to the track campground for the weekend.

"They absolutely loved it," Crosswhite said. "Russ especially was so into the NASCAR racing stuff. That was their thing together."

The Wilbers had been together for about 26 years at the time of their deaths. Charlene, originally from Massachusetts, raised Amy and her younger sister in Wisconsin and Illinois before meeting Russell in her mid-40s.

Russell had two children of his own, Renee in Massachusetts and James in North Carolina.

For their family, Crosswhite said the search for the two was agonizing.

"I wouldn't wish that on anyone," she said. "There was so much uncertainty — so many ups and downs. One day there would be hope, then none, then hope again. It was exhausting."

Her family leaned on online networks to spread awareness. Her son, her sister and Russell's daughter coordinated posts and updates.

Russell's brother also joined search crews in North Carolina, providing the family with daily updates through a group chat.

Crosswhite herself was living through the storm's destruction in Mountain City, where she lost power, water and communication for days. Her driveway washed out, a tree tore through the roof of a cabin on her property, and she could not reach town.

"When I finally got cell service, my phone just blew up," she said.

The damage around her was staggering.

"It looked like the water was coming from the top of the mountain," she said. "Roads were washed out, trees down everywhere. People lost homes, churches were gone. It was surreal."

The family held a joint celebration of life for the Wilbers in March.

"They were loved by so many," Crosswhite said. "They really cared for others. If someone needed something, they were always there to help."



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | THEIR STORIES

# Owners of Main Street Pizza reflect on business, Helene

By OLIVIA PERRY  
operry@sixriversmedia.com

Jamie Dove and Elise Clair, like many others, felt the effects of Helene.

The previous owners of Main Street Pizza Company and current owners/operators of River Creek Farm described the flood as “the straw that broke the camel’s back” when it came to their decision to close the pizza restaurant housed in downtown Johnson City, along with the other location in Kingsport.

“When the flood hit, it was like, ‘Alright, this is our sign,’” Dove said. “We were probably going to do five more years of restaurant



JEFF BIRCHFIELD/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

### Main Street Pizza Company.

business. We own all our other buildings, and we were going to lease them out, but we decided this was probably the time now.”

Dove said problems that led to the closing of the restaurant stemmed back to five years ago, when COVID-19 was at its

height in 2020. He said the restaurant business in general took a hard hit, and once things began to even out, there was an issue of new building owners at the King Center, where Main Street Pizza was located.

Those issues, compiled with the

### Main Street Pizza

Jamie Dove and Elise Clair are the previous owners of Main Street Pizza Company, a restaurant that was located in downtown Johnson City. There was also another location in downtown Kingsport. The business shut down the Johnson City location Dec. 15, 2024, and the Kingsport location Dec. 22, 2024.

most-recent destruction Helene wrought upon their farmland, led to the decision to shut down the pizza restaurants.

“At that point, it just became, ‘Well, this is probably our sign to exit,’” Dove said. “Let’s do what we were already planning to do later, now. And so, that’s what we decided to do, and we haven’t looked back much since.”

Along with the decision to close the restaurants, Dove and Clair had plenty of work and recovery efforts to take care of in their personal lives. Dove said while there was no damage to their home at Rock Creek Farm, the Nolichucky’s waters completely carved out forested areas and acres of farmland.

The aftermath of it all was mud, sand,

missing land and nearly a year’s worth of maintenance and cleanup to have the property somewhat recovered from the destruction. Where there were once forested areas are deep gorges, and part of the land that was leased to Scott’s Strawberries will never recover.

“The area that we leased to Scott’s down there, it was the best farmland we had,” Dove said. “It’s never farmable again. That’s a loss.”

Both Clair and Dove said the flood provided perspective for their lives. Dove said while he loved the work accomplished, his and Clair’s focus shifted

See PIZZA, Page H14

# Good will part of Goodwill Industries’ mission during Helene

By BRIAN WOODSON  
bwoodson@sixriversmedia.com

KINGSPORT — Goodwill Industries lived up to its name during the recovery efforts from the devastation of Helene.

One day after the storm swept across Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia, Goodwill Industries of Tennesse gathered to decide what they could do to help.

“This was obviously missions for us to help the community in such a time of need,”

said Matt DeLozier, vice president of people operations at Goodwill Industries. “I do a lot of things, but the missions part of my job is exactly what this was.

“I think we realized we were kind of uniquely positioned to help in a different way than people are used to people helping so we were able to get out pretty quickly.”

Three weeks later, Joe White drove the first tractor-trailer load of what was predominantly clothing from Goodwill

Industries in Kingsport to Stoney Creek near Jonesborough to deliver donations that had been gathered through a pair of donation drives at the Toy F. Reid Employee Center.

“For everybody here, it was new as an organization to do something like that,” DeLozier said. “We knew we needed to do something and what we could do was take the confusion of donating clothes and make it make sense to people.”

See GOODWILL, Page H63



BRIAN WOODSON SIX RIVERS MEDIA

Goodwill Industries stepped up when needed most during the recovery from Helene. Included in the effort, from front, Amanda Adams, Sherry Meade, Matt DeLozier, Janie Jarvis and Joe White.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | THEIR STORIES

## Erwin native steps up as flood recovery continues

By **ANDREW SMITH**  
asmith@sixriversmedia.com

ERWIN — Nathan Farnor saw the effects of Helene firsthand.

Since then, he's helped launch long-term recovery efforts in Erwin and Unicoi County.

Farnor, the coordinator of Leadership and Civic Engagement at ETSU, is an Erwin native and graduate of Unicoi County High School. He grew up and still lives on the banks of the Nolichucky River.

For most of his life, living on the river wasn't too much to be thought of. But on Sept. 27, 2024, the full power of the Nolichucky was on display.

#### FIGHTING THE RISING WATER

When the storms first began, Farnor could see the Nolichucky and nearby business Blue Ridge Paddling out of his kitchen window. At first, the waters started to rise, but nothing to seemingly be overly concerned about.

"Every few hours, you can see the water getting a little deeper and a little deeper," Farnor said, "And it continues to rise. We'd check it periodically, and again, you'd make comments about it. 'Look, it got higher again.'"

"But it wasn't until the water breached the



RISE Erwin donated \$225,000 to the Unicoi County Flood Relief on Nov. 25, 2024. Pictured from left: Tara Baker, Rylie Scott, Jenna Lafever, Meisha Turner and Nathan Farnor hold the check.

*'What truly makes a community a community is the people. I think when things for me will feel truly normal again is when I can look out my kitchen window and I can see people playing in the field across the street, a family listening to live music, somebody in line at a food truck. People living their lives.'*

— Nathan Farnor, chair of Unicoi County Long-Term Recovery Group

banks and started to slowly puddle up into the industrial park and the paddling property, where we knew that this was more than just a normal storm."

Eventually, Farnor contacted friend and co-owner of Blue Ridge Paddling, Mason Schmidt. That call turned into Farnor walking to the property to check in and

see if Schmidt needed help.

At first, that entailed getting outdoor seating inside and putting up a few sandbags to protect entrance points. However, that goal had to change not long after starting.

"By that point, the water's already gotten significantly deeper," Farnor said. "It's not just slow-moving water.

It's now becoming a river on the property. Trees are starting to fall as the bank of the river is eroding. We start to realize the current of the river is actually changing. Where we're standing, the river is slowly moving closer and closer to us. Before long, we're actually going to be right in the middle of the river."

At that moment, other neighbors and friends arrived at Blue Ridge Paddling with trucks, trailers and other miscellaneous equipment ready to go. The goal then became to move as much from the property as possible up the hill to Farnor's place.

The process went on for nearly an hour, starting with the smallest things in the store and eventually getting to the big items like rafts, tubes and kayaks. All the while, the river continued to rise, getting close to knee and tire height.

After all of the equipment had been moved to Farnor's yard, the group still wasn't confident the water wouldn't get up

to the top of the hill. So, they moved it even further away, starting the process over again.

Later in the evening, Farnor was back at his house and back watching the water through his kitchen window. There, he witnessed one of the two Blue Ridge Paddling buildings start to collapse.

It wasn't much longer before Farnor decided to evacuate, as well.

#### RETURNING HOME AND HELPING

When returning to his house the next day, Farnor found the waters got halfway up his driveway, but never touched the property itself. The same couldn't be said for the paddling company, where one building was gone and half of the other was, too.

Innumerable amounts of debris from nature, homes and business scattered the entire area. Interstate 26 was severed.

"It looked like a war zone," Farnor recalled.

But, as quickly as the damage piled up, the communities of Unicoi County and beyond rallied together.

While search and rescue missions looked for the lost, schools served as temporary shelters, churches served as food pantries, and strangers cleaned up neighborhoods they didn't live in.

See **RISE**, Page H57



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | THEIR STORIES

# Helene responders: Army National Guard helicopter crews joined Unicoi rescue efforts

By MIKE STILL  
mstill@sixriversmedia.com

ERWIN — As Unicoi County emergency crews faced Helene's flooding a year ago, the Tennessee Army National Guard joined in with an unexpected water rescue.

Three UH-60 Blackhawks and their



To view the video report, scan this QR code.

crews flew from the TANG Aviation Facility at McGhee Tyson Air Force Base that Friday morning

after calls from state and local emergency agencies about a swollen Nolichucky River isolating Unicoi County Hospital.

"We had two aircraft show up almost simultaneously and one began doing rescue while the other landed on the roof," recalled pilot CW4 Brian Spotts. "Our third aircraft showed up five minutes later and got in sequence landing on the roof."

Photos from Sept. 27 showed cycles where one Blackhawk perched on the roof as another lowered a paramedic toward a swift-water rescue boat near the hospital to recover a flood victim.

Blackhawk crew



CONTRIBUTED

Tennessee Army National Guard helicopter crews joined in with an unexpected water rescue during the Unicoi flooding.

chief Sgt. Gabriel Weston — a native of the Elizabethton-Johnson City area — said the view of his hometown area had changed with Helene's arrival.

"I didn't quite recognize it," Weston said. "It was pretty messed up when we first arrived. (It was) probably the worst recovery or rescue effort that I'd taken part in. It was so large it was hard to describe."

The TANG crews flew their rescue loads to Unicoi County High School for transfer to ambulances or transport, refueling at Tri-Cities Airport.

While TANG rescue helicopter crews train for bad weather conditions, Spotts said high winds and the flood-water around the hospital put that training to the test.

"It's definitely the most intense stateside mission I'd ever flown," said Spotts. "It

was the most difficult thing I'd done in 10 years, but I was hyper-focused and hyper-vigilant on not crashing a 20,000-pound helicopter in the river."

Paramedic Sgt. First Class Nolan Ogle was one of the first National Guard crew members lowered onto the hospital.

"You do a patient evaluation first and determine how you're going to extract them," Ogle said. "I'll

tell you, though, those guys on the roof had excellent control of that situation. Both for the hospital staff and the swift water fire guys on the roof, I was very impressed with their courage and composure during this emergency."

Ogle and paramedic Sgt. First Class Giovanni Dezuani from another Blackhawk helped evacuate 35 patients and staff from the hos-

pital roof the morning of Helene.

"I didn't take into account the intensity or urgency of the situation," Ogle said.

"Until I saw the walls buckling at the bottom of the hospital when I climbed into one of those boats."

Aircrews typically would not train in the weather extremes encountered on Sept. 27, but Ogle said they were exceeding training limits for flying and hovering in winds by 15 miles per hour that day.

"We had to rely on the crews' extensive experience to accomplish the mission," Ogle added.

Besides rescuing hospital patients and staff members, the TANG group also flew search-and-rescue sweeps downriver until sunset for a 16-hour first day.

"Looking back, it was surreal just thinking about how intense the situation was and reflecting back on the nurses and staff, the swift water guys, how collected and calm they were in the moment," Spotts said. "You've got some real special people in that community."



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | THEIR STORIES

# Local outfitter helps AT hikers with ferry service

By JOHN THOMPSON

jthompson@sixriversmedia.com

ERWIN — A light-bulb moment came to Slaton Johnson, owner of the Nolichucky River Outpost of Wahoo's Adventures.

Johnson knew there were two outdoor industries affected by Helene when the river surged beyond its banks, devastating the area.

Hikers needed a ferry service and rafters could give it to them.

"We weren't able to take our passengers down the Nolichucky and the hikers weren't able to cross the river," Johnson said. "I decided to call the ATC (Appalachian Trail Conservancy) and see if we could get together."

The trails through the mountain, especially the Appalachian



WAHOO'S ADVENTURES

**A river guide from Wahoo's Adventures provides a ferry service across the Nolichucky River where the Chestoa Pike Bridge once crossed. The service was provided free to hikers on the Appalachian Trail during the time when northbound thru-hikers were normally reaching the Erwin community (March 15 to June 15).**

Trail, were blocked by miles and miles of fallen trees.

In addition to the blocked trails, there was also a need to reroute the trail because the Chestoa Pike Bridge had been

washed away near Uncle Johnny's hiker's hostel. That added a 3.6-mile blazed detour to provide hikers with a crossing at the next closest bridge.

Other issues included ongoing

heavy construction to rebuild the CSX railroad line through the gorge.

Wahoo's and the ATC made a deal.

Johnson said the ATC agreed to pay Wahoo's for trans-

porting hikers across the river where the bridge had stood.

Johnson said he was able to rotate the job between the workers that had been laid off by not being able to guide rafts down the river.

The service was provided during the peak of the time when the northbound hikers usually pass through the region, from March 15 to June 15, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. The ferry-raft was stationed where the Chestoa Pike Bridge had crossed the river (northbound mile 344.6).

Even though the hikers were sitting in a raft and enjoying the trip across the river, it still counted as mileage for the trip.

There are several areas along the route where hikers can take rafts or canoes and go by a water route rather

than hike the official trail.

This is known as aqua blazing. There are several other areas along the AT where aqua blazing is common. The nearest to the area is at Watauga Lake, where Boots Off Hostel provides the service to paddle a portion of Watauga Lake instead of taking the trail across Watauga Dam and up Iron Mountain.

Johnson said the ferry service went well this year and he plans to continue the service next thru-hike season.

Hikers were not charged to use the ferry. Johnson said Wahoo was paid by Appalachian Trail Resiliency Fund, which was created by the ATC to meet the financial demands of the worst disaster in the 100-year history of the trail.

## PIZZA

From Page H11

toward enjoyment rather than continuous attempts to make something work.

"It makes you realize how precious your time is," Dove said. "So, you start to make some decisions based on that, and after 21 years of restauranting as hard as I could go, it was time for a break."

Now, the pair works and maintains the

farm, as well as manages the other projects they have their fingers in, such as real estate. They also recently started up their subscription-based farm-to-table grocery box, containing fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs from River Creek, something they had shut down in lieu of the hurricane.

However, now that the land has made a steady recovery over the last year, Dove said the decision to start up

the boxes once again happened slowly, yet naturally.

"We didn't expect to do it this year at all, so that's a plus," Dove said. "We're ahead on that thing, so we're going to keep rolling through winter here and into spring, and we'll kinda decide next year what our plans are in that thing."

"It's kind of a stab at normalcy," Clair added. "Putting that stuff in the ground and getting excited about plants coming — it's always a

fun thing to do."

The future for the partners involves a handful of different plans. Dove said farming and seeing where the subscription box demand goes would play a large part in their lives, along with continuous investing in the housing market. Clair said she makes her own searches for work and will also maintain focus with the subscription packages.

Dove added that while he will not personally be overseeing

another restaurant anytime soon, the likelihood for Main Street Pizza to make a comeback held a small flicker of potential.

"There is some interest in somebody bringing Main Street back to life with it being less of a hands-on situation for me," Dove said. "We'll see where that lands. I don't put a lot of stock into things until they get really far... There's some talk of it, of it making a comeback. Maybe some vetted entrusted opera-

tors, and we'll see where that lands, but no promises."

Both Clair and Dove agreed, however, that the extra time they now have is spent doing things they enjoy, something they each intend on continuing as time progresses.

"We've really enjoyed some downtime," Clair said with a smile.

"We have a lot to manage still, so we're not in any huge hurry to find out what's next," Dove added. "But it'll present itself."



# Here Then. Here Now. Here Always.

When Hurricane Helene reshaped our community, we stood together. A year later, we honor our community's strength and promise to always stand with you, in every season of recovery and resilience.



ETSUHealth

[ETSUHealth.org](https://www.etsuhealth.org)  
(423) 433-6757



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | THEIR STORIES

# Delps saw needs met at BMS relief center

By **JEFF BIRCHFIELD**  
jbirchfield@sixriversmedia.com

Amanda and Brian Delp definitely believe in divine intervention following their experiences leading the Northeast Tennessee Disaster Relief Center at Bristol Motor Speedway.

Working in coordination with the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency, they frequently saw the needs of those met in a way they describe as “God’s will.”

It started with Bristol Motor Speedway becoming a distribution site for supplies in the first place. Amanda, who is the director for the Unicoi County Chamber of Commerce, said in the days following Helene, a truck was delayed for an extended period of time trying to get relief supplies to Unicoi County High School.

The usual two-minute drive from Main Street in Erwin to the high school took over 45 minutes with traffic backed up. With other tractors and trailers stalled trying to get water and other supplies to the high school, things got so crowded that emergency vehicles got blocked in.

Her husband, Brian, who worked 43 years in the Carter County School System, saw some of the same grid-

lock across the county line.

As this was going on, Bristol Motor Speedway President Jerry Caldwell reached out to Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee to see how his team could help.

BMS turned out to be the perfect location, centrally located within the Tri-Cities area where they could get supplies in and out, but where it wouldn’t interfere with cleanup and recovery efforts.

They reached out to the Unicoi County EMA director and asked for help to set up a call center. Amanda was chosen for the task since she had experience coordinating the annual Apple Festival. She asked Brian to come along, who in turn asked his best friend Stan, in case they were needed.

Thinking they’d be just there a few hours to move furniture and get things organized, they spent the next four months working at BMS with the relief efforts. In less than three hours from the time they arrived at BMS, calls for help started coming in.

“So we get to Bristol and started working on the call center, getting all that set up,” Amanda recalled. “I reached out to the Kingsport Chamber and Johnson City Chamber. Within a couple hours, we had the call center set up.

We had phone lines in, and were starting to receive calls.”

Brian and Stan walked out into the warehouse with Brandon Smith from TEMA. Amanda recalled that Smith said nothing of this magnitude had been done and how he prayed for God to send the right people for the job.

“Brandon tells the story as he was driving from Unicoi County, he prayed you’ve got to send people to make this happen because the state’s not going to make it happen,” Amanda said. “He needed local people and someone who knows how to run a warehouse. He needed people with ties to Carter and Unicoi counties.”

Stan, who had worked at Lowe’s warehouse for over a decade, gave advice on how he would organize things. He turned out to be perfect for the job, and when Brian offered his help, Smith learned of his history as a school teacher and county commissioner.

As soon as Brian spoke, the words came out of Brandon’s mouth: “I know that’s you, God.”

Still, the Delps thought they were only going to be at BMS a few days to get the relief center going. When they were asked to stay, they prayed about it and felt it was



CONTRIBUTED

**The South Building at BMS is filled with water during its use as a Northeast Tennessee Disaster Relief Center warehouse.**

where they needed to be.

They worked closely with BMS personnel — Anthony Golden, Josiah Carrier, Trey Hatcher and others — as the TEMA folks went back to their home counties after the first seven days.

“We had a good group from TEMA that helped establish it,” Amanda said. “But, there had never been a regional distribution center of this size. I remember looking at the warehouse, which is the South Building at BMS. It’s where they have the drivers’ meetings sometimes, and it’s 80,000 square feet. I’m thinking, ‘If we can fill up a quarter of this, we will be doing good.’”

See **BMS**, Page H62



CONTRIBUTED

**Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee poses with Stan Huff, Brian Delp and Amanda Delp at the Northeast Tennessee Disaster Relief Center.**



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | GUEST COLUMNS

## Trestle 17 — a symbol of strength and a community's remarkable resilience

CONTRIBUTED

**W**hen Hurricane Helene hit our region, Damascus Town Manager Chris Bell spent countless hours on and near Trestle #17 on the Virginia Creeper Trail, both during the flood and in its aftermath.

During that harrowing time, Bell witnessed the full force of the flood. "I saw RVs float down the creek and smash into the bridge's pilings. I saw swift water rescue teams launch just yards to the west, plucking stranded residents and visitors from their porches. Standing on the edge of Trestle #17, I explained to the Under Secretary of the USDA how critical its reopening was to our community. I also directed multiple volunteer organizations and contractors in our cleanup efforts from its deck."

"Given its central role in both the devastation and the recovery, I felt it was only fitting to tell my story from the bridge's own perspective."

I am Trestle 17, a sturdy sentinel of timber and steel, rooted deep in the heart of Damascus, Virginia. For generations, I have stood here, a living relic of the old railroad line that once breathed life into these Appalachian valleys. My timbers have felt the rhythmic



CHRIS BELL

Trestle 17 stands at the the midway point of the Virginia Creeper Trail in Damascus, Virginia.



CHRIS BELL

After the waters receded, beneath the abutment buried under deposits of sediment and stone, lay the tattered remnants of daily life: books, clothes and countless photographs, all soaked, torn and irrevocably lost.

chug of steam engines, then the gentler cadence of countless footsteps and bicycle tires. I am the midway point of the Virginia Creeper Trail, a proud 407-foot span bridging downtown to the vast

wilderness of the Cherokee and Jefferson National Forests.

By the early hours of Friday, Sept. 27, the rain grew from whispers into a steady drumming on my

sturdy deck. Laurel Creek, usually a tranquil murmur beneath my feet, began to swell, its voice growing deeper, more menacing. This was not a hurricane's grand entrance, but the relentless, lingering remnants of Helene, dumping an unthinkable deluge.

I felt the earth around my pilings tremble as a deep groan rumbled up from the bedrock. Then came the surge. It wasn't just water; it was a furious, churning torrent — an enraged beast of mud, rock and broken branches acting as a battering ram. I braced myself as my network of beams and

supports became an unwilling sieve, gasping as I choked on the uprooted trees, tossed vehicles, and splintered trestle sections from my own brothers and sisters upstream. The moaning of my strained timbers was joined by the pained protest of cracked porches and rooftops trapped against my sides. The murky, turbulent flow finally breaching the streambank with such primal force, taking direct aim at the heart of downtown Damascus.

Thump! Another direct hit against my steel beam underbelly. I could feel my right footing begin to slip, the turbid rush weakening my very foundation. Grunting as my deck began to shift, I prayed for the strength to simply hold on. In that moment, it felt as if I had borne the brunt of the entire devastation from Helene's wrath.

Exhausted and soaked, I refused the temptation to surrender and suffer the same fate as my collapsed siblings up the mountain.

When the waters finally receded, the silence was deafening, broken only by the distant, sounds of human despair. Beneath my abutment, buried under deposits of sediment and stone, lay

the tattered remnants of daily life: books, clothes and countless photographs, all soaked, torn and irrevocably lost. The skeletal remains of mobile homes, bikes and campers, once symbols of adventure and comfort, now strewn in pieces beneath me — a grotesque jigsaw puzzle of destruction.

The immense tangle of wreckage clinging to my structure stood as a stark monument to the storm's destructive power. Reopening me and clearing this impossible mess seemed a truly monumental undertaking. The Virginia Creeper Trail, the lifeblood of this community, lay scarred and smashed.

As I looked downstream, I saw the heartbreak. Lives upended. The town lay broken, its streets scoured bare, homes splintered in half, and businesses ruined, all buried knee-deep in muck.

But then, amidst the desolation, the humans began to stir. I felt a new kind of energy, an urgency that was palpable. The hum of machinery filled the air, punctuated by the sharp shouts of direction. Soon, a symphony of recovery began: the whine of chainsaws,

See **TRESTLE**, Page H61



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | GUEST COLUMNS

# A year of pain, gratitude, resilience and community

It's difficult to make sense of an experience that has taken so much from you and your community.

Moving forward from a traumatic experience isn't a straight line. Recovery is a marathon that nobody signed up for, and progress can be so slow it's hard to see that you've moved forward at all.



Harrah

Emotions can be such a confusing mix of pain, relief, grief and gratitude that it all feels difficult to carry. This is why I find value in reflection. Sometimes, seeing how far you've come can be the motivator you need to keep going.

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Helene, the focus is, naturally, on loss. Our team lost a beautiful facility, ambulances and equipment. Some of them lost personal vehicles or their homes. Several community members tragically lost their lives. That sense of loss and pain were important to acknowledge then, and they're important to acknowledge now.

Personally, I've had to learn to balance that pain with gratitude. When I think about that day, I think about the resilience that our team showed as they worked to ensure the safety of our patients in the most uncertain circumstances imaginable. I feel relief in knowing that all 69 people were eventually rescued from the roof of our facility, and I feel thankful for the

*'When I think about that day, I think about the resilience that our team showed as they worked to ensure the safety of our patients in the most uncertain circumstances imaginable. I feel relief in knowing that all 69 people were eventually rescued from the roof of our facility, and I feel thankful for the rescue teams that saw us all to safety.'*

rescue teams that saw us all to safety.

That balance of pain and gratitude has been a theme for me in the year following the flood. I feel the pain of not working with our full hospital team every day and gratitude that many of them still serve the region as health care professionals in other facilities. I feel the loss of our facility and the gratitude we can serve our community through our advanced urgent care clinic.

When I feel the weight of that experience bearing on me, I also feel thankful that my faith is there to hold me up. It's a delicate tightrope I'm still learning to walk every day.

Working without the full Unicoi County Hospital team has been one of the biggest challenges of the past year. The Unicoi County community is a very welcoming one, especially the team at Unicoi County Hospital, who welcomed me with open arms when I became the administrator there in 2023. Many of them are serving communities at different facilities or at our urgent care, but it's not the same as working in that beautiful facility. I miss that every day.

That pain has helped me learn to deeply appreciate

the people around me. That includes our incredible team, who continued showing up in the days after the flood to ensure our community continued receiving the care they needed. It includes every community member who drove to our little town to deliver water and supplies.

When I look back, there is the pain — but again, gratitude. I am continuously awed by the humanity our community experienced in the wake of disaster. We are meant to help each other, and that was never more evident than in the days following the flood. It was and continues to be a beacon of hope for many of us.

For many of us, this experience has taught us lessons that we wouldn't have chosen, but we carry forward with them anyway. As we continue in our recovery, I think it's important to celebrate the incredible resilience of our team and community, but it's just as important to remember that resilience is rarely earned without scars.

**Jennifer Harrah, MSN, RN, AVP, is administrator and chief nursing officer of Unicoi County Hospital.**



CONTRIBUTED

Administrator Jennifer Harrah and staffers are shown at the temporary medical facility that was set up outside the Unicoi hospital post-storm.



CONTRIBUTED

In the days after the storm, Unicoi County Hospital team members continued to work in the temporary medical facility that was set up outside the hospital.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | GUEST COLUMNS

# 'We knew we couldn't sit on the sidelines'

When most people think of Goodwill, they think of retail stores, where you might find a good deal, drop off donations, or support a nonprofit with a noble mission.

But for those of us working behind the scenes, Goodwill is far more than a place to shop. It's a mission-driven, nonprofit, social enterprise built around the power of work, the dignity of service, and the belief that strong communities take care of their own.

That belief has never been more evident than over the past year, as disaster after disaster challenged our region's resilience, and revealed its remarkable heart.

It started with Hurricane Helene, which swept through Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia last October, flooding roads, damaging infrastructure, and leaving hundreds of families with little more than the clothes on their backs. But it didn't stop there. Flooding became a recurring crisis this year throughout the 17 counties we serve, striking communities large and small. The storms came in waves. And so did the need.

Until this year, Goodwill of Tennesse had never led in an area of disaster relief. It simply wasn't part of

our traditional mission. But when we saw the scope of devastation and the suffering of our neighbors, we knew we couldn't sit on the sidelines. We had

resources, facilities, trucks and, most importantly, people who were willing to serve. So, we stepped in. We learned and mobilized.

And over the course of the past year, we helped more than 4,300 individuals at 63 locations across our region, partnering with 32 community organizations to bring emergency assistance directly to those in need. At the center of this effort was a 53-foot trailer we converted into a mobile store, stocked with clothing, blankets, shoes and other items. We would roll into affected communities, set up shop while partnering with a local organization, and give people the opportunity to select what they needed in a safe, respectful and empowering environment.

We didn't stop there. In every Goodwill store across our territory, we made it simple for disaster victims to get help. If someone came in and identified themselves as having been impacted by a flood or storm, we provided two full changes of clothes, no questions asked, no red tape.



Baker



CONTRIBUTED

Goodwill converted a 53-foot trailer into a mobile store, stocked with clothing, blankets, shoes and other items.



CONTRIBUTED

Goodwill employees asked to be involved. They collected and sorted donations, loaded trucks and comforted families.

These efforts were deeply local and profoundly moving.

What stood out most wasn't just the need, it

was the response. Our community stepped up in extraordinary ways. Donations poured in and volunteers worked

*'When we saw the scope of devastation and the suffering of our neighbors, we knew we couldn't sit on the sidelines. We had resources, facilities, trucks, and, most importantly, people who were willing to serve.'*

tirelessly, and clothing, shoes, coats, blankets, and other items were distributed to those in need by people who simply wanted to help.

We are deeply grateful to Bristol Motor Speedway, which served as a regional hub for relief distribu-

tion and coordination. Their willingness to open their doors, figuratively and literally, allowed us to expand our reach. Eastman Chemical Company also played a vital role, allowing us to use their

See **BAKER**, Page H61



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | RESPONSE/RECOVERY

# How much money did region receive following Helene?

By BEN SMITH

bensmith@sixriversmedia.com

NASHVILLE — The state has allocated more than \$597 million to East Tennessee since Helene rocked the region late last September.

That money is directed to a variety of programs. Some are grants and interest-free loans, and others help mitigate certain recovery costs for property owners, businesses and local governments.

In addition to federal assistance, that's a total of at least \$811 million.

That's not to mention the work done by nonprofits. Organizations such as the East Tennessee Foundation, Appalachia Service Project and United Way of East Tennessee Highlands provided grants, rebuilt homes and helped distribute food to hungry families.

"Much has been done to clean up and recover, but there is so much yet to be done in rebuilding our communities, our infrastructure and our families," said state Sen. Rusty Crowe, R-Johnson City. "I want to be there to finish all that yet needs to be done."

Some area legislators say they hope to meet with constituents and local officials to figure out exactly what the region needs



JOHN THOMPSON/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Hampton High School has been closed since Helene caused the Doe River to flood the 65-year-old building. Earlier this year, Gov. Bill Lee suggested that \$20 million for a new Hampton High School be considered during a special session of the state legislature.**

before the next law-making session convenes in January.

They will seek additional funds as recovery projects progress.

Here's a look at the amount of money allocated by the state, where it's going and what's been received.

### Disaster Relief Grants Fund

*\$240 million allocated*

The Disaster Relief Grants Fund was the largest single allocation made to Hurricane Helene efforts during the 2025 Tennessee General Assembly.

The funding, provided by the state and distributed through TEMA, reduces the local cost-share of recovery costs for Helene-impacted communities from 12.5% to 5%.

The fund supports the state's match for federal disaster funds and covers administrative costs.

### Governor's Response and Recovery Fund

*\$125 million allocated, \$80.4 million received*

The GRRF provides direct relief to organizations, certain landowners and businesses affected by Helene in Tennessee. The funds are distributed at the governor's discretion, and the remaining balance is intended for allocating toward future disasters.

\$41.4 million was awarded to 126 applicants in July, including businesses, farmers, forest landowners, local governments and nonprofits.

An additional \$45 million in direct assistance was sent to counties and utility districts. It also covered fees associated with county-issued bonds.

That totals about \$80.4 million received from this fund. The remaining \$44.6 million will be kept on hand for distribution toward future emergencies in the state.

### Helene Interest Payment Program

*\$110 million allocated*

The Helene Interest Payment Program pays up to 5% of interest on federal loans taken out by local governments, allowing counties more flexibility to spend their own funds on recovery efforts.

The fund allocated \$110 million. It is unclear what portion of that has been received by local governments.

The legislation was passed late in April, just before the session concluded. It was sponsored by Sen. Crowe and state Rep. Timothy Hill, R-Blountville.

An original version of the legislation would have allocated \$200 million to go directly to counties and provide direct assistance.

It was a boon to many counties, which had sizable federal loans. According to Crowe, Washington County borrowed

upwards of \$70 million following Helene.

A 2024 independent audit report found that the total revenues of the county are just over \$99 million.

### HEAL Program

*\$100 million allocated, \$91 million received (as of July)*

The Helene Emergency Assistance Loan Program was appropriated by the governor about a week after his trip to Northeast Tennessee surveying the damage wrought by Helene.

The HEAL Program provided no-interest loans to counties impacted by Helene, with the goal of alleviating the significant costs many counties were unable to cover. The loans were funded through a shared savings account within the state's Medicaid program.

Of the total \$100 million, \$65 million was earmarked for debris management and divided equally between eligible counties. \$35 million was allocated for repairing counties' water and wastewater infrastructure.

### Hampton High School Reconstruction

*\$20 million allocated and received*

Funds to help begin rebuilding Hampton High School were also distributed during last year's general assembly. The funds were allocated as part of Gov. Bill Lee's

Education Freedom Act.

The sewage and water system, as well as the high school's athletic fields, were destroyed. Demolition of the football field and bleachers began in mid-August, and officials hope to have students back in the building by January.

State Rep. Renea Jones, R-Unicoi, said the funding has been received.

### Damaged Properties

*\$4.6 million allocated, est. \$2.3 million received in FY 2024-2025*

Some people, whose houses had been completely leveled by flooding, were still required to pay property taxes.

This grant paid 130% of the 2024 tax for those whose properties were damaged or destroyed by Helene.

The bill creating this program was widely supported by the assembly and passed quickly through the legislature last January. Crowe was the primary force behind the bill's senate passage.

A fiscal note attached to the bill estimated that about half of these payments have already been made, with the other half set to be dispersed in fiscal year 2025-26.

According to Jones, this legislation was especially important to the people of Unicoi County.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | RESPONSE/RECOVERY

# Roads, infrastructure take a huge hit from Helene

By **KIMBERLY HARR**  
kharr@sixriversmedia.com

**JOHN THOMPSON**  
jthompson@sixriversmedia.com

**ROBERT HOUK**  
rhok@sixriversmedia.com

**AARON BARLOW**  
abarlow@sixriversmedia.com

**MIKE STILL**  
mstill@sixriversmedia.com

One thing proved a constant after Helene: Damaged roads.

Across Northeast Tennessee, the largest infrastructure expenses and projects have ended up being repairing roads and bridges that total tens of millions of dollars.

Johnson County saw damaged streams. Scott County in Southwest Virginia saw debris piled up.

State and local officials are still working to clean up the infrastructure disaster that was Helene.

### UNICOI COUNTY

Nearly a year after Helene, recovery in Unicoi County remains centered on infrastructure repairs, with bridges, roads, utilities and industrial sites still being rebuilt.

Mark Nagi of the Tennessee Department of Transportation said cleanup efforts have been extensive.

“Our total was 720,000-plus cubic yards of debris removed from East Tennessee roads,” Nagi said. “That’s



CARTER COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Many roads and bridges in Carter County and across Northeast Tennessee were damaged by flooding from Helene.

enough to cover the field in Neyland Stadium in more than 337 feet of debris or more than 11 goalposts high.”

He said that assessed damage costs for roads and bridges already exceed \$303 million and “that number certainly will rise.”

Washington and Unicoi counties are still waiting on key bridge projects. TDOT reported there are still three closures as of Aug. 22: the Nolichucky River bridge on State Route 353 in Washington County, the Doe River bridge on SR 67/SR 91 in Carter County and

SR 159 at Elk Mills in Carter and Johnson counties. Some county bridges are also still pending construction like the Chestoa Bridge in Unicoi County.

Unicoi County EMA Director Jimmy Erwin said federal aid is expediting the Chestoa Bridge replacement in April. He added that roads such as Jackson Love, Temple Hill, Chestoa River and Unaka Springs still need to be rebuilt and repaved.

Erwin said long-term mitigation is another focus, particularly protecting river corridors from future flooding, noting the town is making plans

to armour the river up River Road and Jones Branch Road, with engineering details still being determined by the town of Erwin.

Austin Finch, economic development director for Erwin Utilities, said Unicoi County’s infrastructure costs are substantial, with \$75 million for roads and bridges, \$90 million for wastewater systems and \$17 million in electric, fiber, water and natural gas.

In Unicoi County, industrial infrastructure was also heavily impacted. At the Riverview Industrial Park, 252 jobs were initially lost when six

manufacturers were forced offline. Finch said Aug. 22 that 166 jobs have already been restored, with 40 more coming soon.

Specifically, three companies in Unicoi County will each receive a retainment and retraining grant from the state. The grants represent more than \$4 million in funding, with Foam Products Corp., Plastiexports and PolyPipe USA receiving at least \$1 million that will directly aid in retaining or retraining employees who were previously terminated due to destruction of the company’s facili-

ties, according to Community Development Commissioner Stuart C. McWhorter in a meeting on Aug. 22.

A temporary road was built through the industrial park earlier this year in March to restore access, and plans for long-term improvements are still underway.

At the Erwin Wastewater Treatment Plant that was also severely damaged by Helene, staff returned to the main office and laboratory in mid-March after cleanup, though equipment replacements are still needed. Jason Foster, director of water and wastewater at Erwin Utilities, said in an interview in April that a broken digester heater and a rented centrifuge are limiting operations until permanent fixes or replacements are made.

Washington County’s infrastructure largely held, but housing losses were significant. State Rep. Rebecca Alexander reported in October that Helene caused more than \$37 million in private property damage, destroying 117 homes and damaging 90 more in the county. Town and county roads and bridges took on damages as well, especially in the Little Germany neighborhood.

See **ROADS**, Page H60



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | RESPONSE/RECOVERY

## Legislators outline year two Helene recovery plans

By BEN SMITH

bensmith@sixriversmedia.com

NASHVILLE — Tangible progress has been made in the last year since Helene hit Northeast Tennessee.

Homes have been rebuilt, as have roads and businesses. The state has allocated just under \$600 million to various funds and grant programs, paying off property taxes, loans taken out for recovery efforts and more.

But local legislators say there is still much more to be done.

“We’re being told it probably will take us between three and five years to be totally whole again,” said state Rep. Renea Jones, R-Unicoi. “And let’s face it, especially on the Nolichucky River, it’s never going to be the same.”

Downed bridges, flooded buildings and unusable utility systems are all readily apparent problems, said Jones. But, a year later, the challenge becomes finding the right problems to prioritize.

That starts with an increase in communication between local and state officials.

Both Jones and state Sen. Rusty Crowe, R-Johnson City, have plans to meet with their respective local officials prior to next year’s lawmaking session in January.

From there, they



MARK ZALESKI

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee delivers his fourth State of the State address in the House Chamber in Nashville.

*‘We’re being told it probably will take us between three and five years to be totally whole again. And let’s face it, especially on the Nolichucky River, it’s never going to be the same.’*

State Rep. Renea Jones, R-Unicoi

will get a better idea of which problems need to be tackled at the state level.

“Until you really get people in a room and start talking about it, you can see some of it, but you can’t see it all,” Jones said.

Regional state lawmakers plan to meet in September to discuss plans for aiding recovery efforts in the second year following Helene. Tennessee Emergency Management Authority Director Patrick Sheehan also

plans to meet with county mayors “to make sure everyone is on the same page recovery-wise,” according to Crowe.

Crowe outlined a variety of priorities across his district, including rebuilding roads and bridges and securing funding for reconstruction projects.

One of the last stages of cleanup will involve removing the remainder of waterway debris from the Nolichucky River. The state has provided more than \$140 million to counties in their effort to clean up the river debris.

Crowe said that “effort is almost done but still underway.” According to Jones, the Nolichucky River could be opened as soon as fall of 2025.

Some other projects he hopes to tackle include securing funding for repairing the First Utility District waterlines, which serve around 500 families near Stoney Creek.

Crowe also stressed the need to act quickly rebuilding certain roads, such as Shell Creek Road near Roan Mountain, as they are subject to

major flooding if not fixed quickly.

Crowe mentioned rebuilding the Elk Mills-Poga Fire Department and adding a second location to improve response times, as well as rebuilding the fields and amenities at Eric Anderson Park.

Jones’ priorities include getting the Erwin Riverview Industrial Park up and running again, a process she said has been “slow moving” until recently.

In August, the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development allocated \$4 million to three companies located in the park.

The funds will be used to train and rehire employees who had previously lost their jobs due to the flood damage to the buildings.

Jones indicated she hopes to find some way to address mortgages for people who have lost their homes in the flood.

“I know that was a conversation that came up in the last session, but we didn’t do anything to address that,” said Jones. “But that is a very hard thing, to pay a mortgage on a house that floated down the river.”





Join us in a Week of Well Wishes  
An opportunity to restore hearts,  
rebuild hope, and honor the journey  
since Hurricane Helene.

This is a time to reflect, heal, and  
uplift—together.

Everyone is invited to participate in  
**body, mind,** and soul through moments  
of prayer, community, and compassion.  
Let's turn the page with hope in our  
hearts and strength in our steps.



**Together – We Are Better!**

**Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup>**

**Touchbase  
and Tunes**

Partners &  
Resources Available.

Visit the Gathering  
Space in Downtown

Erwin to connect  
with local partners  
and explore  
helpful resources.

🎵 Followed by live  
music from  
Carson Peters.  
Programs start  
at 5:30pm.

**Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup>**

**Day of Dedication  
Erwin Townhall  
4pm**

Honoring Lives Lost  
A reminder that the  
storm could not  
take away our love,  
our faith, or our  
commitment to  
one another.  
May this day  
deepen our prayers,  
renew our spirit,  
and strengthen our  
faith in.

**Thursday 25<sup>th</sup>**

**Thanks and Praise  
Erwin Utilities'  
Green Space** Join  
us for a special  
moment of  
reflection led by  
Erwin Utilities  
followed by live  
music from the  
ETSU Bluegrass  
Band—5:30pm.



**Friday 26<sup>th</sup>**

**Mass of  
Remembrance  
and Hope**

St. Michael  
the Archangel  
Catholic Church.  
The Community  
is invited.

Service starts  
at 6:00pm.

**Saturday 27<sup>th</sup>**

**Say Your Prayers  
The Best is  
Yet to Come  
Community  
Gathering**

(bi-lingual service)

Gather at Erwin First  
Baptist Church  
Multi-Church, prayer  
vigil for the blessings  
we've received and  
for brighter  
days ahead. 💜💙🙏

Service starts at 3:30pm.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | RESPONSE/RECOVERY

# A Q&A with FEMA about Helene response

### From staff reports

Six Rivers Media submitted the following questions to Federal Emergency Management Agency related to their response to Helene in Tennessee.

See the questions and answers below:

**Q: How did FEMA have a boots-on-the-ground presence in Northeast Tennessee following the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Helene? What was FEMA's primary role in the first month of relief and recovery?**

A: As part of any disaster response, FEMA immediately dispatches teams of responders that arrive at state emergency operations centers normally within hours of the onset of the emergency. In many cases, when possible, these teams — known as IMATs — Incident Management Assistance Teams, are often in place before an event occurs, coordinating state and local needs with scalable federal resources that can be activated in response to the event. These teams are made up of emergency management professionals who work with the federal coordinating officer to assess state priorities and needs during an incident. FEMA's primary role in the onset of events is to provide that resource support and begin to coordi-



GRACE TEATER/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

Seen here, FEMA marked a trailer overturned by Helene flooding with an orange "X."

nate the deployment of personnel needed to respond to the event based on its size and impact.

**Q: How did FEMA communicate with local officials, EMAs, etc., in Northeast Tennessee, especially in the first few days following Hurricane Helene? (Describe the command center or how/where things happened.)**

A: FEMA worked with state emergency managers at TEMA immediately after the arrival and passing of Helene at the Emergency Operations Center in Nashville. Following the state's guidance, FEMA reached out to local leaders and emergency management directors. FEMA established additional branch offices in Knoxville and

Kingsport to support the response to Helene.

**Q: What are some statistics you can provide about FEMA's overall response in Northeast Tennessee? How many reservists were deployed to the area to assist Northeast Tennessee during Hurricane Helene?**

A: At the height of the Tropical Storm Helene response in Tennessee, FEMA had 468 personnel deployed to the Tennessee response for Tropical Storm Helene with many deployed to provide support during response and recovery efforts. This number includes both full-time and reservist personnel.

**Q: How long did FEMA have a physical presence in Northeast Tennessee?**

**Has that presence discontinued, or is it ongoing?**

A: FEMA continues to have a significant presence in supporting Tennessee's recovery from Tropical Storm Helene. FEMA will continue to support Tennessee's recovery if the state determines the need for federal support exists. As of late August, FEMA has nearly 200 personnel deployed in Tennessee.

**Q: As Northeast Tennessee approaches the one-year mark since Hurricane Helene impacted the area, what are the continued needs FEMA is seeing for communities affected?**

A: Our partners at TEMA would be better suited to provide a status from a local perspective.

**Q: With a new hurricane season underway, how would FEMA recommend Northeast Tennessee residents better prepare and equip themselves in the case of something like Hurricane Helene impacting the region again?**

A: FEMA recommends that everyone have an emergency plan to know what they will do if they are impacted by any kind of disaster. As we have seen, hurricanes, tropical storms, wildfires, floods and tornadoes often come with or without warning and your best defense is to be prepared. We suggest everyone visit [www.Ready.gov](http://www.Ready.gov) for resources to create an emergency plan, which includes an emergency kit, family communication plan and an inventory, including photographs, of your home and all personal property within it. Review your personal documentation, including all insurance documents, deeds and property ownership documents, medical records and other personal papers. Make sure these items are accessible should you need to evacuate your home.

**Q: Following Helene, a lot of misinformation regarding FEMA was being spread both on a local and national level. How would you say this impacted your time working in the region, if at all?**

A: One of FEMA's key functions while responding to disasters is working with state and local officials in providing the public with accurate, coordinated and actionable information that will assist them with their immediate needs as well as their long-term recovery.

Any rumors and bad information, intentional or unintentional is detrimental to those who are relying on the most accurate information they need to receive the help they require.

It causes additional stress to the disaster survivors as they navigate the disaster recovery process, and it requires FEMA to often redirect resources to counter inaccurate information. It slows both FEMA's ability to accurately measure and meet the needs of survivors as well as the survivors' understanding of what, where and how they access resources available to them through the local, state, federal agencies as well as local grassroots and national voluntary organizations. During times of disasters, we establish a rumor control page on [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov) to combat wrong information with the correct information for survivors looking for the truth.



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER | RESPONSE/RECOVERY



BRANDON SMITH/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

A pile of debris sits off Interstate 26, across from Unicoi County Hospital, on Feb. 5, 2025. More than 5 million cubic yards of debris has been collected in Northeast Tennessee.

## 5.2M cubic yards of Helene-related debris collected in Northeast Tennessee

By **BRIAN WOODSON**  
bwoodson@sixriversmedia.com

**RICK WAGNER**  
rwagner@sixriversmedia.com

More than 5 million cubic yards of debris has been removed from four rivers and their tributaries in Northeast and East Tennessee since last year's flooding.

Here's some perspective on the tropical storm-driven flooding that developed from Helene Sept. 27:

Most full-size commercial dump trucks hold between 10 and 16 cubic yards, which means 5.2 million cubic yards roughly would be between 325,000 and 520,000 dump truck loads. That's enough debris to fill 1,600 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

### Breakdown of debris

Greene County had the most Helene-related debris to be collected with 1.6 million cubic yards, followed by Cocke County with 1.4 million, Washington County 1.1 million, Carter County 406,400, Unicoi County 376,700 and Johnson 287,300. Hamblen County accounted for the rest of the 5.2 million cubic yards total.

A Knoxville-based private contractor, Phillips & Jordan, recently renamed Phillips Heavy Inc., did the removal under contract with the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency. The contractor's work in seven counties is officially done.

"Normally this kind of cleanup process would be handled by the local jurisdiction, but just due to the massive amount of debris and the unprecedented nature of this disaster

the state assumes this responsibility just to get those areas restored as close to pre-Helene as possible," TEMA communications director Kristin Coulter said in a recent interview with Six Rivers Media.

Coulter said 5.2 million cubic yards of debris was collected from the Watauga, Nolichucky, French Broad and Pigeon rivers and related tributaries in seven East Tennessee counties.

See **DEBRIS**, Page H59

## Watauga Lake debris could fill almost quarter of Neyland Stadium

By **JOHN THOMPSON**  
jthompson@sixriversmedia.com

**HAMPTON** — Crews collected more than 300,000 cubic yards of debris from Watauga Lake and Carter County streams, state officials said.

"While we are still recovering from Helene, we have come a long ways and all the debris has been collected," Carter County Mayor Patty Woodby said. "Our lake is clean and beautiful again. We need to tell the nation that we are open for business."

The cleanup has led to the biggest fishing tournament in the his-



THOMAS SHERRILL/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Crews remove logs from Watauga Lake at the Butler Memorial Bridge on April 17.**

tory of Watauga Lake coming on the anniversary day Helene struck the Southern Appalachians and filled the lake with debris.

It was announced in July that Watauga Lake would host the

2025 Bassmaster College Classic Bracket presented by Lew's on Sept. 26-29.

"I am looking to tell the nation that Carter County is back," Woodby said.

See **WATAUGA**, Page H59



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER | RESPONSE/RECOVERY

## Warning system deficiencies discovered, improvements made after Helene flooding

By JUSTIN EPLEY  
jepley@sixriversmedia.com

As Helene pounded Northeast Tennessee last September, rivers in the region swelled over their banks and brought devastating flooding to the region.

Swept away in the storm were buildings, bridges and livelihoods as Helene fulfilled the role of “Storm of the Century.” Things happened so abruptly that, in some cases, it seemed like there wasn’t much warning beforehand about dangerous river flooding.

Questions arose in the aftermath of the surge, wondering if more could be done to send out warnings along rivers like the Nolichucky in the case of future storms.

The Nolichucky River flows through the local counties of Unicoi, Washington, Greene, Cocke, Hamblen and Jefferson, passing by or through the Nolichucky Dam, Douglas Lake, Douglas Dam and the Rankin Wildlife Management Area.

Heather Sipe, director of the emergency management agency for Greene County and Greeneville, made note

that both some deficiencies in the warning system and the destruction of some warning equipment became factors during Helene.

“As far as warning systems along the Nolichucky River, (as for) sirens, there are none,” Sipe said.

Sipe said river gauges are monitored. For example, ones at the South Toe River near Celo, N.C.; the Nolichucky River at Embreeville; Big Limestone Creek near Limestone; and the Nolichucky River below the dam in Greene County.

“These sites give us data as the river flows our direction,” Sipe said. “We also work directly with hydrology officials with the National Weather Service in Morristown, as well as the River Forecast Center, to obtain crest data, times and more.”

Sipe said they are looking to place additional gauges in Greene County to enhance the data.

“I have been working with FEMA and TEMA and, also, county officials, such as the county mayor, throughout the

See **WARNING**, Page H58



THOMAS SHERRILL/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

Two major bridges in Poga, near the Johnson and Carter county border, were destroyed by Helene.

## Replacing bridges no simple task

By AARON BARLOW  
abarlow@sixriversmedia.com

A year after Helene, several damaged Northeast Tennessee bridges, including one completely destroyed, are still needing to be rebuilt.

Mark Nagi, Tennessee Department of Transportation Region 1 communications officer, said five state-owned bridges were “destroyed by Hurricane Helene in East Tennessee.” All of these have been reconstructed, except for Bailey Bridge in Washington County.

Bailey Bridge is a part of SR 353 and crosses over the Nolichucky River. According to Nagi, around 1,420 vehicles drove on the bridge per day before Helene.

The state awarded Summers-Taylor, Inc. a \$20,970,200 bid in February to replace the bridge. The project’s estimated competition

date is May 17, 2026, according to Nagi.

Replacement bridges need to be engineered before they are constructed. This is one reason bridges often take longer to replace than roads.

Several county-controlled bridges still need to be replaced, such as the 411-foot-long Corby Bridge in Washington County. Assistant Highway Superintendent Doug Jones hopes engineering for the bridge will be finished this year, so a bid for its construction can be made at the start of 2026.

“[The bridge] is in a farming community. A lot of those farmers have farms on both sides of the river, so they’re having to go five miles out of their way just to get to the other side,” Jones said. “It’s a real headache for them.”

Across Johnson County, six bridges need to be repaired. The Johnson County Board of

Commissioners hoped to approve a company to do the work during its Aug. 21 meeting, but no bids had been made.

Three major bridges in Carter County are in need of reconstruction, according to the county’s highway department. Poga Bridges 1 and 2 are both 230 feet long and cross Elk Creek. Long Hollow Bridge crosses the Doe River.

Engineering for all three bridges was set to finish by Sept. 1, and the county will put out a bid for their construction. Temporary bridges are available for citizens to use in the meantime.

Helene’s impacts are still being discovered. Carter County Highway Superintendent Shannon Burchett announced at the start of August that two more bridges were being closed after damage from Helene had been spotted.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | RESPONSE/RECOVERY

# Post-Helene recovery groups at work in 6 counties

By RICK WAGNER  
rwagner@sixriversmedia.com

When it comes to long-term recovery group work on flood losses or damage to homes, businesses and jobs in Northeast Tennessee, long-term is more likely to be five years than two.

As the one-year anniversary of the floods that hit much of the region arrives Saturday, much work remains to be done.

That's how Kat Latham, Northeast Tennessee regional director of disaster recovery for the United Way of East Tennessee Highlands, described efforts to rebuild homes, industries and lives after Helene spawned flooding.

"We're looking to at least five years before everybody gets squared away," Latham said in a recent interview with Six Rivers Media.

LTRGs facilitate work and donations from faith-based groups, social agencies, government, community organizations and individual volunteers to meet the "spiritual, emotional and physical needs of the individuals and families affected by disaster," according to the Washington County LTRG Mission Statement.



Latham

### FIRST THINGS FIRST

Latham had a front-seat view of the magnitude of the flooding disaster as emergency operations center manager for the Washington County Emergency Management Agency. "There were many meetings," Latham said. "It starts with local communities and ends with the local communities."

After vetting needs and sorting through survivors and doing case management, she said offers to help were directed to appropriate projects. Among those providing rebuilding and repair to housing were and still are Catholic Charities, the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, United Methodist Commission on Relief, Lutheran District Relief and Presbyterian Disaster Relief.

Also active were individual churches, Habitat for Humanity and the Appalachian Service Project, the latter especially in Washington County where it has a base.

Federal Emergency Management Agency officials met with volunteers in each of the six counties, Latham said.

"They heard about it, they saw the need and they wanted to



CONTRIBUTED BY CAROLINE RUSH, WASHINGTON COUNTY LONG TERM RECOVERY GROUP

A post-Helene home going up in March, thanks to donated supplies and volunteers from Grace Baptist in Springfield, Tennessee.

respond," Latham said, adding that the overall process is called the Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster or VOAD.

The process is to be transparent, use good case management and connect survivors with organizations or people to fulfill needs.

### SIX COUNTIES HAVE GROUPS

Of counties in Northeast Tennessee, FEMA authorized individual assistance to eight counties, and six accepted. The six are Carter, Cocke, Greene, Johnson, Unicoi and Washington. Hawkins and Hamblen declined the assistance, and Sullivan was not deemed eligible.

All told, more than \$1.1 million in federal FEMA funding is being used in the six counties. Latham said that in Unicoi the bulk of the recovery is going toward helping rebuild industrial jobs lost when the Nolichucky River flooding wiped out an industrial park in Erwin and three major industries among 20 there.

The efforts in the other five counties are mostly focused on rebuilding or repairing homes, Latham said. Information on the funding and its use is available online at [easttennesseefoundation.org/news/](http://easttennesseefoundation.org/news/).

From the Sept. 27 flooding to around

Christmas, she said the program was in stabilization mode. She said that was a process to establish sometimes makeshift homes for folks, as well as getting them shelter and transportation.

### WORK OF INDIVIDUAL GROUPS

For instance, in Johnson County, Latham said 55 residences have been rebuilt or repaired with 45 to 70 to do with applications still being taken.

Individual LTRG project managers in the region include Carolyn Rush in Washington County, Becky Wright in Johnson County and Kelly Munns in Carter County.

Another is Suzy Cloyd, executive director of the Unicoi County LTRG. Cloud said she's been "pleasantly surprised how many jobs are here" despite the flooding decimation of the Riverview Industry Park near Interstate 26 in Erwin.

A hiring event was held Aug. 21 to help find folks jobs, sometimes temporary ones until industries can get back in operation. Cloyd said the Red Cross, Holston Habitat and local churches have stepped up in Unicoi. Catholic Charities and the United Methodist Church relief group also have been active,

See **RECOVERY**, Page H37



# East Tennessee Hurricane Helene Timeline

Contributed by Gabrielle Jones

## SUNDAY, SEPT. 22, 2024

- Hurricane Helene began forming in the western Caribbean Sea.

## TUESDAY, SEPT. 24, 2024

- Hurricane Helene became a tropical storm, being given the name "Helene" from the National Hurricane Center.

## WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 25, 2024

- (Early Morning) Hurricane Helene became a hurricane.
- In anticipation of Hurricane Helene's landfall TEMA deployed one Swiftwater Rescue Team to Florida.

## THURSDAY, SEPT. 26, 2024

- (Evening) Reached Category 4 intensity.
- Landfall in Perry, Fla.

## FRIDAY, SEPT. 27, 2024

- Hurricane Helene hit Tennessee and saw the most significant damage in the following counties but had a major impact across East Tennessee.
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County
- Gov. Bill Lee declared a State of Emergency through Executive Order 105.
- Officials in Washington County told Embreeville residents to evacuate.
- Officials in Hawkins County told residents to shelter in place.
- Officials in Washington and Cocke County told residents to evacuate.
- As of 4:30 p.m. CDT, there were 100,900 reports of power outages statewide.
- I-26 at mm 40 closed in Unicoi County due to downed trees and flooding.
- Cocke County, Newport Utilities Board Wastewater Treatment Plant shut down due to flooding.
- North Carolina closed I-40 west of Asheville at the state line.



## SATURDAY, SEPT. 28, 2024

- FEMA authorized Public Assistance (Category B) emergency protective measures including direct federal assistance and reimbursement for mass care including evacuation and shelter support at 75% federal funding for:
  - Carter County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
- As of 10 a.m. CDT - 74,700 reports of power outages statewide.
- TBI established a hotline to coordinate reports of missing persons.
- Director Patrick C. Sheehan submitted an amendment to Tennessee's Public Assistance Emergency Declaration to add the following counties to the request for direct federal assistance and to authorize Cocke County for additional assistance:
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
- Boil water advisories in:
  - Cocke County - Newport Utility Board
  - Carter County - Elizabethton Water Department
  - Johnson County - Mountain City Water Department

## SUNDAY, SEPT. 29, 2024

- FEMA authorized Public Assistance (Category B) emergency protective measures including direct federal assistance at 75% federal funding:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
- FEMA authorized Public Assistance (Category B) emergency protective measures, limited to direct federal assistance and reimbursement for mass care including evacuation and shelter support at 75% federal funding for:
  - Hawkins County
  - Washington County
- The TBI had received 337 calls seeking information about individuals in East Tennessee. Many were believed to be safe but unable to presently identify themselves as such due to limited cell service - 143 of which were active leads.
- The Tennessee Department of Health confirmed two weather-related deaths.
- Boil Water Advisory: 4



**MONDAY, SEPT. 30, 2024**

- Gov. Bill Lee requested an expedited Major Disaster Declaration (Public Assistance and Individual Assistance) for:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County
- Grainger County also included on this request but only for Public Assistance.
- The Crisis Clean-Up Hotline was established for survivors who need assistance with clean-up efforts.
- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, 100 of which were active leads.
- The Tennessee Department of Health confirmed six weather-related deaths.
- Boil Water Advisory: 7

**TUESDAY, OCT. 1, 2024**

- All 310 state bridges had been inspected by TDOT and five were destroyed:
  - Washington SR-81 Nolichucky River Bridge
  - Washington SR-353 Nolichucky River Bridge
  - Greene SR-107 Nolichucky River Bridge
  - Unicoi I-26 Bridge at MM 39.6 Eastbound
  - Unicoi I-26 Bridge at MM 39.6 Westbound
- The Tennessee Department of Health confirmed eight weather-related deaths.
- Boil Water Advisory: 17
- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, 46 of which were active leads as of Oct. 1.

**WEDNESDAY, OCT. 2, 2024**

- Former President Joe Biden declared a major disaster for state of Tennessee under Stafford Act.
- TDEC issued a temporary water contact advisory telling the public to avoid all contact with water bodies.
- Gov. Bill Lee announced approval of his request for an Expedited Major Disaster Declaration for:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County
- Bristol Motor Speedway was designated as the Northeast Tennessee Disaster Relief Center in coordination with TEMA.
- Water Boil Advisory: 15
- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, 23 of which were active leads as of Oct. 2.
- The Tennessee Department of Health had confirmed 11 weather-related deaths.

**THURSDAY, OCT. 3, 2024**

- Boil Water Advisories: 19
- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, 27 of which were active leads as of Oct. 3.

**FRIDAY, OCT. 4, 2024**

- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, 22 of which were active leads as of Oct. 4.
- Dolly Parton visits Walmart in Cocke County (Newport) that was struck by Hurricane Helene, joined by Walmart CEO John Furner to announce Parton's personal \$1 million donation combined with \$1 million from Dollywood Foundation and her other businesses. Walmart, Sam's Club and the Walmart Foundation increased \$6 million to \$10 million.
- Individuals in the following counties could apply for FEMA assistance (from Oct. 2 application):
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County

**SATURDAY, OCT. 5, 2024**

- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, 23 of which were active leads as of Oct. 5.
- Boil Water Advisories: 17

**SUNDAY, OCT. 6, 2024**

- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, 15 of which were active leads as of Oct. 6.
- The Tennessee Department of Health had confirmed 12 weather-related deaths.
- Water Boil Advisories: 15

**MONDAY, OCT. 7, 2024**

- Multi-Agency Resource Centers (MARC) open in Elizabethton and Jonesborough.
- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, 9 of which were active leads as of Oct. 7.
- The Tennessee Department of Health had confirmed 15 weather-related deaths.
- Water Boil Advisories: 15

**TUESDAY, OCT. 8, 2024**

- Water Boil Advisories: 14
- The Tennessee Department of Health had confirmed 16 weather-related deaths.
- 4,502 validated registrations and FEMA had approved more than \$3.1 million in Individual and Household Program funding.



**WEDNESDAY, OCT. 9, 2024**

- Gov. Bill Lee announced three more counties had been approved for FEMA's Public Assistance Program:
  - Claiborne
  - Grainger
  - Sullivan
- Gov. Bill Lee and the Tennessee Department of Revenue announced tax relief measures for businesses and individuals affected by Hurricane Helene.
- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, six of which were active leads as of Oct. 9.
- The Tennessee Department of Health had confirmed 17 weather-related deaths.

**THURSDAY, OCT. 10, 2024**

- Gov. Bill Lee announced the Helene Emergency Assistance Loans (HEAL) Program, a \$100 million fund to directly serve the health and well-being of Tennesseans in the aftermath. Counties eligible:
  - Carter County
  - Claiborne County
  - Cocke County
  - Grainger County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Jefferson County
  - Johnson County
  - Sevier County
  - Sullivan County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County
- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, four of which were active leads as of Oct. 10.

**FRIDAY, OCT. 11, 2024**

- Water Boil Advisories: 11

**SATURDAY, OCT. 12, 2024**

- The TBI had received more than 500 calls regarding missing individuals, of which one was an active lead as of Oct. 12.

**SUNDAY, OCT. 13, 2024**

- TEMA opened a MARC in Cocke County (Newport).

**MONDAY, OCT. 14, 2024**

- The Tennessee Department of Human Services announced Disaster Supplement Nutritional Assistance Program (D-SNAP) benefits to qualifying households.
- Boil Water Advisories: 10

**TUESDAY, OCT. 15, 2024**

- FEMA opened a Disaster Recovery Center in Unicoi County (Erwin).

**WEDNESDAY, OCT. 16, 2024**

- The Biden-Harris Administration approved more than \$1.8 billion in assistance. More than \$11.8 million for the 2,400 survivors in Tennessee.

**THURSDAY, OCT. 17, 2024**

- U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg visited I-40, the first high level federal official to visit East Tennessee.
- \$32 million in emergency highway aid to TN.

**FRIDAY, OCT. 18, 2024**

- The Tennessee Department of Human Services announced that qualifying families who live or work in the following counties can receive one-time emergency cash assistance:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County

**MONDAY, OCT. 21, 2024**

- Disaster unemployment assistance for:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County
- TBI no longer had any active missing person leads.
- FEMA had approved more than \$13.5 million in Individual and Housing Program Funds.

**TUESDAY, OCT. 22, 2024**

- Survivors were eligible for both Physical and Economic Injury Disaster loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) in:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County
- Small businesses and most private non profit organizations in the following counties were eligible to apply for only SBA Economic Injury Disaster Loans:
  - Grainger County
  - Hancock County
  - Jefferson County
- Disaster Recovery Center opened in Greene County (Greeneville).



### **WEDNESDAY, OCT. 23, 2024**

- Disaster Recovery Center opened in Hamblen County (Morristown).
- FEMA Public Assistance Program may provide assistance to faith-based organizations that provide essential social services to the public that were affected by Hurricane Helene.

### **WEDNESDAY, OCT. 30, 2024**

- 1 month after Helene in Tennessee.
- \$16 million in recovery.
- The Red Cross, Salvation Army and the Tennessee Department of Education had completed their mission after serving 140,903 meals.
- \$16.4 million funding from Individuals and Households Program.
  - More than \$8 million represents Housing Assistance to help homeowners cover damage not covered by insurance.
- \$8.3 million in Other Needs Assistance which covers necessary disaster related expenses such as medical bills, money to clean, repair, or replace household items; to repair or replace vehicles damaged by the disaster and other non-housing needs.
- More than \$1.07 million for 186 claims was paid to the National Flood Insurance Policy holder. The program also extended the grace period for paying policy premiums to Tuesday, Nov. 26.
- More than \$53,000 was paid in Disaster Unemployment Assistance to Tennesseans.
- Public Assistance, a cost sharing program and FEMA's largest grant program, typically covers 75% of funding and the state covers 25%. For Helene damage, former President Joe Biden authorized 100% federal funding. This means FEMA will cover all eligible cost incurred during any 45 day period of the state's choosing during the first 120 days from the start of the disaster (Sept. 26).

### **THURSDAY, OCT. 31, 2024**

- FEMA offers assistance to help people who are self-employed, including farmers, ranch hands, artists, musicians, and mechanics, if you are a resident of or work in:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County



### **FRIDAY, NOV. 1, 2024**

- Disaster Legal Services were offered to low income, elderly and other vulnerable residents affected by Helene who can't afford their own lawyer in:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County

### **THURSDAY, NOV. 7, 2024**

- FEMA, TEMA, TDEC, EPA, USACE, OSHA, local authorities (including Jefferson County) and the TVA have begun coordinated efforts to clear debris from Douglas Lake.

### **FRIDAY, NOV. 8, 2024**

- College and university students may be eligible for FEMA assistance for:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County
- A Disaster Recovery Center opened in Johnson County (Mountain City).

### **MONDAY, NOV. 25, 2024**

- Two months after Helene in Tennessee
- More than \$20 million to residents in:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County
- Over \$10 million in financial Housing Assistance to more than 6,150 households had been delivered to cover reimbursement for short-term lodging, rental assistance, home repair and home replacement.
- Over \$10 million in Other Needs Assistance has been paid to more than 10,600 households to reimburse both homeowners and renters for uninsured or underinsured out-of-pocket expenses.

### **THURSDAY, DEC. 5, 2024**

- Disaster Recovery Center opened in Cocke County (Newport).



**FRIDAY, DEC. 6, 2024**

- Former President Joe Biden increased 45 day period to 120 days.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture and TEMA announced hosting Farmer Recovery Centers. Survivors were able to meet with agency representatives in one-on-one sessions for information on housing and farm repairs, as well as reimbursement for disaster-damaged tools, supplies and equipment in:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Greene County
  - Hamblen County
  - Hawkins County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County
- New Disaster Recovery Center opened in Carter County (Elizabethton).

**TUESDAY, DEC. 10, 2024**

- Farmer Recovery Center opened in Greene County (Greeneville).

**WEDNESDAY, DEC. 11, 2024**

- Farmer Recovery Center opens in Sullivan County (Blountville).

**THURSDAY, DEC. 12, 2024**

- Farmer Recovery Center opens in Washington County (Jonesborough).

**MONDAY, DEC. 16, 2024**

- The deadline to apply for Disaster Unemployment Assistance is extended to Jan. 7 (originally Jan. 6).

**MONDAY, DEC. 23, 2024**

- FEMA had approved more than \$24.4 million in federal assistance to help storm survivors recover.
- More than 14,200 households have applied and have been approved for \$24.4 million in assistance under the Individuals and Household Program.
  - More than \$12.5 million represent Housing Assistance to help homeowners repair or replace residential property damage that is not covered by insurance.
  - More than \$11.8 million in Other Needs Assistance covers necessary disaster related expenses such as medical bills; money to clean, repair, or replace household items; to repair or replace vehicles damaged by the disaster and other non-housing needs.
  - One of the first larger projects was eliminating the enormous amounts of debris deposited by Helene. As of Dec. 23 the state of Tennessee had removed nearly 1 million cubic yards.

**FRIDAY, JAN. 3, 2025**

- FEMA announces that Jan. 7 Disaster Recovery Centers in the following counties will close and be replaced with Document Processing Centers:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County

**TUESDAY, JAN. 7, 2025**

- Deadline for:
  - Tennessee homeowners, students and renters impacted by Helene to apply for FEMA disaster assistance.
  - Long term, low interest loan from the U.S. Small Business Administration.
- FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers closed in:
  - Carter County
  - Cocke County
  - Johnson County
  - Unicoi County
  - Washington County

**WEDNESDAY, JAN. 8, 2025**

- Document Processing Centers, where survivors were able to turn in documents and follow up on application and appeals, open in:
  - Carter County (Elizabethton)
  - Johnson County (Mountain City)
  - Unicoi County (Erwin)

**WEDNESDAY, JAN. 15, 2025**

- Tennessee lifts water contact advisory that was put into effect Oct. 2, 2024.

**WEDNESDAY, FEB. 26, 2025**

- Part of I-40 reopens  
According to NOAA final report, there were 18 total deaths in Tennessee; 15 deaths directly related to Hurricane Helene, 2 with unknown causes and 1 indirect death.



# HELENE - A COUNTY'S RESILIENCE

**"Unicoi County has been home to me for my entire life. The location is perfect, the mountains and streams are among the most beautiful... but the citizens who live here make it shine above any other place in the world. Although last year's disaster hit us hard, you did not give up. For that I commend you. Let's continue to work together to not only get Unicoi County back to what it was but make it better than ever.**

**The flood is part of our history, but we cannot let it define our future."**

**JP Metcalf**





## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | REBUILD/RESILIENCY

# Rebuilding Bumpus Cove: Family talks recovery, resilience

By **ALLISON WINTERS**  
awinters@sixriversmedia.com

**BUMPUS COVE** — Abby Burgner said she's spent her whole life living near her grandparents, sharing the same property as them in Bumpus Cove.

Burgner, 26, walked around the property explaining what has changed for her family since Helene impacted the community nearly a year ago. She pointed to a newer house at the front of the property closest to the road.

"My house used to be where my grandparents' house is," Burgner said. "Then their house used to be on this hill with the back right of the hill. Their house didn't get washed away, but ours did."

Burgner's grandfather, whom she lovingly refers to as Papaw, sat on the front porch of the new home on a late August afternoon during the start of the interview. In a shaded spot behind Burgner's home still in the process of being built, she recounted some of the scariest moments of her life.

On the morning of Sept. 27, Burgner said she was in her house and started to feel like the foundation was moving.

"I don't know how to describe it, other than you know when you're in an elevator and it jolts," she said. "That's what it's like, and so I just got out of there."



CONTRIBUTED

**Abby Burgner's home was destroyed from Helene's flooding. She said the home was transported a football field's length away from where it originally stood.**



ALLISON WINTERS/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Abby Burger (pictured right) poses for a photo with her grandfather David Story (pictured left) and his dog Buddy. The photo was taken inside Story's new home after Helene.**

She said her grandfather had seen the area experience flooding in 1977, so he was determined the water would recede before it got worse. Burgner said by that point, the water was up to their ankles.

"We didn't know what to do, because there was no getting him out, and I wasn't gonna leave him," she said. "My brother and his wife, they looked at me. I don't know if he said anything like 'Get out,' but I grabbed

Mamaw. I had [our dog] Buddy and my Mamaw, and we were walking all through there trying to get away from the water coming this way."

While trying to get to safety, Burgner said her grandmother went underwater after falling into a hole. She tossed Buddy onto land and was able to pick her Mamaw up with the help of a neighbor. The family made it out of the water with using her brother's truck and

trailer carrying them up the hill through the glade behind the property.

Burgner said she stayed with her brother's butcher that night, someone her brother had never really spoken to before. But the family desperately needed somewhere to go.

"I don't even know this man's name, and [my brother] was like, 'My family just lost everything. Can we stay the night with you? Like they have nothing,'" Burgner said. "So he let us stay the night with him. He fed us, gave us water, everything."

### THE AFTERMATH

The next day, Burgner said she and her family came back to salvage what they could — which wasn't a lot. Family heirlooms like her Papaw's great grandmother's oil lamp and tea cups that belonged to her mom were lost from the flooding.

She said her dad's storage building helped reroute some of the water flow around the grandparent's house to keep it from washing away. Two of her cats survived, which were later found clinging to the curtains and on top of the air conditioning unit in her Mamaw's back bedroom.

"One of the weirdest things was going in my house — or what was left of my house — and seeing the walls that

were left, and seeing where the water had been," Burgner said. "The mud streaked."

Burgner said without the community, she wouldn't have been able to truly make it out. She remembered watching a group of people pull a woman, who couldn't open the door to escape, out of her house on Furnace Hill Road. A group of farmers on the other side of the Jackson Bridge were helping people.

"They kept calling it the island, because all of the bridges were washed out and Arnold Road was stuck," she said. "I have a video of us going over the road and it bottomed out my dad's truck and his oil leaked everywhere."

Burgner said she still has a scar on her knee from trying to cross the bridge during Helene.

She got clothes and food from Lamar Elementary School and David Crockett High School until they were no longer donation locations.

After living with a cousin for a month, Burgner said a different cousin was offering their family a place to stay in Erwin at a discounted rate. More than anything, she said she is ready to move back into her home in Bumpus Cove.

She said her new home is being built by volunteers from Elizabethton Church of Christ, who broke

ground on the project in December.

When it rains now, Burgner said she tends to just stay inside, put on headphones or go to sleep. She said storms can resurface a lot of bad memories and feelings.

"I went to therapy a few weeks after the flood, and it was beneficial," Burgner said. "I wake up in the middle of the night and feel water around my legs a lot. I'll have my niece and nephew and I'll be babysitting them, and a flood comes, and it's things like that that still mess with me."

### PAPAW'S STORY

Burgner's grandfather, David Story, shared his experience from Helene. Now 82 years old, Story said he's lived in this area most of his life.

He went to Lamar High School before joining the U.S. Army and married his wife Nell Story, who died in April after battling cancer. Story said in 1977, the flood waters only made it a little bit past the mailboxes, but during Helene, the water just kept coming.

"Everybody's wanting us to leave and get out and get out. I said, 'Well, if it makes it to the porch, we'll go out,'" he said. "Because we could've gone out up the hill, but just in a very few minutes, it was up on the porch back here."

See **BUMPUS**, page H35



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER | REBUILD/RESILIENCY

## ‘Down but not out’

Antioch Baptist Church set to rebuild one year later

By **JEFF BIRCHFIELD**  
jbirchfield@sixriversmedia.com

MOUNTAIN CITY — Helene washed away Antioch Baptist Church. It couldn't wash away the spirit of the congregation.

Floods from that day tore the church from its physical foundation, located a couple miles south of Mountain City and visible from U.S. 421. A year later, the people at Antioch are more strengthened in their faith than ever before.

Pastor Mike Fenner said in an interview with Six Rivers Media that he and his wife were in shock a couple of days after seeing the devastation. The church building located off U.S. 421 had washed down stream, just leaving a pile of rubble.

After going through a range of emotions, Fenner said, “The Lord made it clear he wanted us to rebuild.”

The kindness shown by others has been

inspiring.

They've received over \$600,000 in donations from individuals, churches, organizations and nonprofits. Pastors of all denominations from the Florida Keys to Minnesota have reached out to see how they can help.

Central Baptist Church opened its doors soon after the flood and allowed the Antioch congregation to worship there. In recent weeks, a picnic shelter, nicknamed “The Outdoor Tabernacle” by Fenner, has been put up where Wednesday night services were conducted the night we visited.

At that time, Antioch was still working through the process of different approvals, and final drawings from the engineers, before the church building itself can be rebuilt.

“We have been meeting at Central Baptist Church, which is just two miles down the road,” Fenner said. “But when we got this

up on days that it's not bad weather, we come up here just to be on the property. Every evening it's kind of cooler, so it works pretty good.”

Fenner had an appropriate message during the service. It was based on James 4:14, a verse that talks about the fragile nature of life. Beyond the flood, prayer was requested for the family of a former community member who died unexpectedly at 42.

The scripture reads: “Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.”

Fenner, 55, has a passion for the church and his home community. He and his wife met when they were in middle school and have been married 32 years. A 1988 graduate of Johnson County High School, he's done a variety of jobs from working at the local prison for 20 years,



BENJAMIN PRICE/CONTRIBUTOR

The tragic image of Antioch Baptist Church being washed away by the floodwaters from Helene.



JEFF BIRCHFIELD / SIX RIVERS MEDIA

The congregation listens to the message during a Wednesday evening service at Antioch Baptist Church.

managing a farm for a decade and the last six years, owning his own mowing and landscaping business.

He was saved in 1996 and called to preach when he was 29. There have been challenging times. He was asked to come to Antioch when the church lost its pastor during the COVID pandemic. Then a year after arriving, the floods came.

Since last September, the response from

others has been overwhelming. A Methodist church from North Carolina sent a \$5,000 check for the rebuild the day before the Wednesday service. Fenner said many others have promised to lend their skills to the project.

“Once we're digging footers, we've got contractors lined up and offering to help us,” he said. “I've had electricians say they'll wire it for free if we just buy

the material. I've got a plumber friend, he said he do all the plumbing. It's been amazing.”

The message remains positive. Fenner shared with the congregation the importance of taking inventory of one's live, loving one's family and enjoying the blessings from God. Fenner isn't caught up in the past as much as living in the present and looking to the future.

A big sports fan, he sounds like a coach with a message of overcoming the setbacks to score a victory.

“We're down, but we're not out,” he said. “The Lord has blessed us here, and it's going to be alright. It's amazing how God has provided. We're going to rebuild for His glory, and just see what God will do for us.”

## BUMPUS

From Page H34

After making it out, Story said he and his family watched all the houses wash away as they waited at the top of the hill.

“We just watched it,” he said. “Watched the houses float off, little buildings, oil tanks and propane tanks.”

David and Nell Story moved

into their grandson's old farmhouse for the winter months after Helene. Then they moved into the camper sitting on the property until Nell died. David said he stayed in the camper until his own home was livable at the start of July.

“I bought all the door locks and all that, put them on,” Story said. “Cabinet handles, microwave, you know, things like that. And got all the furniture in here.”

### CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Burgner walked over beside the Nolichucky River and pointed out where the river and other rock used to sit. She said where she stood used to be her neighbor's home, gesturing to remnants of flowers that grew in her yard.

“There was an Airbnb, like, it was the most beautiful rock stone home,” Burgner said. “It was completely vintage inside. Somebody bought it and made

an Airbnb. It had a patio that went out above the river, and got completely washed away.”

She said it upsets her that there is still so much dirt, trash and junk around the river that no one will make the effort to clean up.

“[The river] just needs to be left alone for a little bit,” she said. “It needs to be cleaned up and left alone.”

Both Story and Burgner said they hope to throw a com-

munity cookout before fall starts. Story said since Helene, their family has hosted cookouts for anywhere from a few to 75 people.

“A low country boil, that's probably my favorite,” Story said. “They're getting ready to have another one. We were planning on that and [Nell] got sick, or we would have already had one. I'm gonna have one of those before this warm season ends.”



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | REBUILD/RESILIENCY

# Unicoi Animal Shelter names new director, eyes rebuild

By **KIMBERLY HARR**  
kharr@sixriversmedia.com

The Unicoi County Animal Shelter announced new leadership and a temporary facility nearly a year after Helene destroyed its building.

On Sept. 27, 2024, the shelter began to take on water during the storm. Floodwaters quickly rose several feet, prompting a rescue of all animals inside. Every animal was safely evacuated and taken to the nearby Food City for transport to other shelters or temporary homes.

Since the storm, the Unicoi County Animal Welfare Board has worked to raise funds to rebuild the shelter, all while taking care of existing animals and duties. At its regular meeting on Aug. 22, the board introduced a new director and reviewed bids for the new shelter.

The board hired Mollie Haren, a Johnson City veterinary technician with six years of experience, as director in mid-August. In an Aug. 25 interview with Six Rivers Media, Haren said she has worked at two rescue operations and is eager to begin her role at the facility.

She is joined by part-time animal control officer Selena Baubilitz, who has remained in her position since the flood while also taking on extra responsibilities



CONTRIBUTED

**The management and staff of PolyPipe USA in Erwin visited the Unicoi County Animal Shelter on April 13 to donate some much-needed supplies and a new kitten castle.**

during the board's search for a director.

During the meeting, the board discussed three construction bids for a new shelter, with an estimated total cost of about \$1.139 million, according to members of the board.

Previous board meetings outlined plans for larger kennels, separate intake entrances and a new mechanical system. The system, estimated at \$300,000, would provide negative air flow to prevent disease from spreading between rooms. Board members noted the improvements could enhance animal welfare and strengthen future grant applications.

Board member Richard Doris said at the Aug. 22 meeting that operating the shelter typically costs between \$200,000 and \$300,000 annually. Board member Charles Day said Unicoi County Mayor Evely has pledged \$100,000 for

operations once the shelter reopens. That announcement sparked discussion about seeking additional contractors to lower construction costs.

While awaiting a new facility, the board has set up a temporary shelter equipped with electricity, water and climate control. Currently, only animals picked up by animal control and those awaiting court dates are housed in the temporary kennels, according to Haren.

Board member Tiffany Swinehart said in a June meeting that the Washington County Animal Shelter and other regional shelters have taken in more than 300 Unicoi County animals since the storm. The board is now drafting a memorandum of understanding with regional partners to continue helping with the county's animal needs until a new shelter is built.

# Feeling the sting

## Centuries-old tree felled, not forgotten

By **AARON BARLOW**  
abarlow@sixriversmedia.com

Countless trees were blown over during Helene. In Mountain City, the loss of one tree stung more than the rest.

The "Heritage Oak Tree" was taller than 90 feet and had a crown spread of nearly 190 feet. Estimated to be between 300 and 350 years old, the tree was one of the oldest in the state of Tennessee before being uprooted by severe winds the morning of Sept. 27, 2024.

The tree lived in Cunningham Park and was a community staple. For months, the downed tree remained where it fell as conversations discussed how best to memorialize it.

The Johnson County Center of the Arts has refused to let the tree be forgotten. They have sold cross-sections of the tree's branches, engraved with the name and silhouette of the tree.

They are also planning on using the tree's timber for bigger projects, including "a tree ring timeline." This would show a cross-section of the tree's trunk and match its rings to important events in the community's history.

Cristy Dunn, executive director at the Johnson County Center for the Arts, said any large-scale project may take years as they wait

for the tree's huge trunk to dry out fully. Meantime, artisans at the center have worked on individual projects honoring the tree.

Dean Townsend, who attends to Mountain City's parks, said he worked around the tree for 18 years. He recalls working during the storm.

"Our supervisor came up and said the big tree had fell. That's when I heard about it," Townsend said.

Townsend sawed off a section of the tree and crafted it into a wood cabin diorama. Included in the diorama is a mailbox with the address "2025 Big Oak Drive."

Two other details in the diorama with personal meaning are a firewood shed and a set of birdhouses.

Rick Ramsey has plans to carve two knife handles from the tree's wood. He wants to give one knife to the art center and another to the town of Mountain City.

"They can display it as they want, make a frame for it," Ramsey said.

He is still looking for a symbol that he can engrave in the handles to represent Mountain City.

John Jackson started photographing the Heritage Tree in 2020.

"For a tree to be here before the European settlers settled ... the continuity of it appealed to me," Jackson said.



AARON BARLOW/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**The toppled Heritage Oak Tree remained at its original site for nearly a year after it fell.**



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER | REBUILD/RESILIENCY

## Goodwill more prepared for emergencies after Helene

By **BRANDON PAYKAMIAN**  
brandonp@sixriversmedia.com

**KINGSPORT** — Local Goodwill leaders say the nonprofit's mobile disaster relief program developed in response to Helene will remain on standby for future emergencies in the region.

According to Amanda Adams, communications director for Goodwill Industries of Tennesse (Tennessee/Virginia), the regional nonprofit partnered with Eastman last fall to host two major community donation drives to gather clothing and shoes for families displaced by flooding in the region.

In order to reach those in the hardest-hit areas, she said, the nonprofit converted a 53-foot trailer into a "mobile relief unit," delivering clothing and footwear directly to those in need.

Goodwill Tennesse President and CEO Morris Baker said the rapid response effort showed what communities are "capable of when we come together to serve."

"When disaster strikes, everyone has a role to play, and that's how a community truly serves one another," Baker said. "We recognized that part of our expertise lies in collecting, sorting and distributing essential

items, and that's where we knew we could make a difference."

Baker said their team mobilized quickly to reach affected communities, not as part of a project, but as a full organizational response.

"We were privileged to be a part of the relief efforts and are stronger because of that," Baker said.

Goodwill leaders said the mobile relief approach proved effective, serving over 4,100 people in the affected areas around Northeast Tennessee, in addition to 200 people who received assistance from stores during the crisis.

"We coordinated closely with other nonprofits to target the communities that needed us most," said Matt DeLozier, vice president of people operations. "Hurricane Helene reminded us how quickly lives can change."

Adams said the project also enabled the organization to serve residents in other areas affected by the flooding, beyond their original field of operations.

"We applied these same capabilities during the Buchanan County floods, extending our mobile response framework and community partnerships to another crisis," she said.

While most of the

organization's Helene-specific relief efforts have since come to a close in recent weeks, nonprofit leaders said the mobile unit won't be retired.

Adams said the organization's commitment to readiness remains steadfast.

"Goodwill's disaster response trailer will remain on standby — prepared to deploy rapidly in the event of future disasters within our region," Adams said. "This mobile resource allows us to bring much-needed relief directly to affected areas, ensuring that those in crisis have access to basic necessities during challenging times."

Adams said that Hurricane Helene response efforts overall helped strengthen the nonprofit's logistics for community emergency preparedness.

"We will continue to stand ready — because when disaster strikes, compassion and preparedness matter most," she said.

The mobile unit serves communities across the Tennessee Valley region, where Goodwill operates several stores and locations geared toward job training and other community support services.

For more information on the nonprofit's regional work or volunteering, visit [www.goodwilltnva.org](http://www.goodwilltnva.org).

## RECOVERY

From Page H27

Cloyd said. Local churches also have assisted with the efforts.

Meantime, according to the six-month report from the Washington County LTRG, provided by Rush, that county had \$37 million in damages to private property and that of 435 damaged properties, the LTRB facilitated "direct assistance or support" to 250.

As of press time, the second six-month report was not yet available, Rush said, and some other LTCG leaders could not be reached for comment.

However, separate from the current report, Rush said Washington County "recorded over 32,000 hours of volunteer time," with 30 completed homes and 71 more under construction.

In that six-month report, two examples of help were Grace Baptist Church of Springfield, Tennessee, which sent 72 volunteers for a four-day housing building event on two homes; and Elizabethton-based Landscape Impressions, which completed 10 landscape installations in Washington County.

The Washington County LTRG reported in the first six months of operation \$377,412 in donations and grants, a \$293,538 in direct financial support from the East Tennessee Foundation to cover administrative costs, over \$872,089.78 worth of volunteer labor and \$233,860 in donated materials.

### HOUSING

A lack of adequate housing was a major issue in all affected counties but especially the five other than Unicoi, Latham said.

"There were lots and lots and lots of people in that position," Latham said of people living in a camper, trailer, mobile home, double wide or house other than their own, sometimes doubling up with friends and family.

Although some lived in tents

by necessity in the beginning, she said those living in tents now are doing so because they want, not have to do that.

### WHAT IF ANOTHER FLOOD COMES?

Looking to the future for area homeowners, Tennessee Emergency Management Agency Communications Director Kristin Coulter said homeowners should strongly consider having and keeping flood insurance, saying that studies have shown that even one inch of water in a home is \$25,000 of damage from the start.

"We are seeing an uptick in disasters, and we are having to try to get people to prepare sooner rather than later because for us in Tennessee it is not a question of when or if a disaster will happen, but whether when a disaster will happen," she said.

Coulter said TEMA stands ready to help with future flooding and other disasters, which included mostly federally funded work to clean up the four rivers and tributaries in seven Northeast Tennessee counties.

Coulter said they want to emphasize that people know the risk. If you live in a flood plain, make sure to have flood insurance because normal homeowner's insurance doesn't include flooding. Also, they're seeing flooding happening in areas that aren't necessarily in flood plains.

### CUT TO THE CHASE

Coulter said being prepared is key for the future, saying it's the best advice they can give. Flooding without insurance creates a huge financial burden, she said.

"While a good chunk of people may not have had to experience that and I am very grateful for those people that haven't had to experience that, you just don't know what is going to happen."

**Six Rivers Media reporter Brian Woodson contributed to this article.**



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | REBUILD/RESILIENCY

# Habitat for Humanity, ASP build dozens of new homes for displaced families

By **BRANDON PAYKAMIAN**  
brandonp@sixriversmedia.com

**KINGSPORT** — Regional nonprofits Holston Habitat for Humanity and Appalachia Service Project have completed or begun work on more than 60 homes for people displaced by Hurricane Helene, amid plans to build even more.

Habitat for Humanity has completed over 40 critical home repairs in Northeast Tennessee since beginning recovery work in November 2024, with 17 additional repairs currently underway, according to spokesperson Nick Karshner.

The nonprofit is preparing to construct seven new homes for displaced families using funding from the American Red Cross and private donors.

“The families we partner with are active participants in rebuilding their homes and their futures,” Karshner said. “Every project represents hope renewed after loss.”

Appalachia Service Project has completed 11 new home builds and nine major repairs as of Aug. 8, with three additional homes nearing completion.



Appalachia Service Project has completed 11 home builds and nine major repairs for families affected by Helene as of last month.

The Johnson City-based organization has also committed to finishing 200 homes in affected local regions as part of ongoing Hurricane Helene recovery efforts.

“Every home we finish represents not just a structure, but a life restored,” said Ani Boyd, ASP’s East Tennessee regional director. “We remain committed to continuing this work until the last family in need has a safe, warm and dry place to call home.”

Karshner said Helene destroyed 176 homes in Washington County and damaged more than 370 additional properties, causing an estimated \$45 million in damages, according to official estimates. ASP reported that 50 more local homes “sustained significant damage.”



CONTRIBUTED/ASP

“Washington County demonstrated the greatest need [we noticed],” Boyd said. “This may in part be due to our home office being located in Johnson City and our prior involvement in flood recovery efforts in the Dry Creek area, which helped us con-

nect quickly with affected residents.”

Recovery efforts span multiple counties across Northeast Tennessee and North Carolina. ASP said they are working in Carter, Cocke, Greene, Jefferson, Johnson, Unicoi and Washington counties

in Tennessee, plus Avery and Mitchell counties in North Carolina.

Karshner and Boyd emphasized the collaborative nature of local Helene recovery efforts, which have involved thousands of volunteers to assist with labor, and part-

nerships with major retailers like Lowe’s and Home Depot that provide the materials necessary for construction.

“The scale of our Hurricane Helene recovery has only been possible because of the incredible collaboration between our volunteers, community members, partner organizations and financial supporters,” Boyd said.

Karshner stressed the ongoing need for community involvement.

“The scale of need remains significant. Our work is one part of a larger community recovery effort, and each home we repair or rebuild is a step toward restoring stability and resilience in our neighborhoods,” he said.

Both organizations said they will continue to accept volunteers and donations to support Helene recovery efforts.

For more information about ASP’s recovery efforts, visit [www.ASPhome.org](http://www.ASPhome.org). To apply for assistance from Holston Habitat for Humanity or to learn more about the nonprofit, visit the nonprofit’s website at [holstonhabitat.org/helene-relief](http://holstonhabitat.org/helene-relief).



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | HEALTH

# Unicoi hospital rebuild timeline unclear amid Medicaid cuts

By JOY MAZUR  
jmazur@sixriversmedia.com

ERWIN — The timeline of the Unicoi County Hospital rebuild is still up in the air — but Ballard Health remains committed to the project.

After flooding from Helene forced dozens to evacuate from the hospital roof and destroyed the facility last year, the plan was pretty straightforward: Ballard would rebuild. The state of Tennessee and the Federal Emergency Management Agency approved \$9.8 million for the project in February, and action was underway to secure a new hospital.

“We were in the process of acquiring land, working on designs and then to rebuild the facility as we had it before,” said Eric

Deaton, Ballard’s chief operating officer.

Then President Donald Trump signed the “One Big Beautiful Bill” into law on July 4. The law will make sweeping changes to Medicaid in the next decade, a provision that has prompted uproar from both sides of the aisle as experts and hospital systems warn that the cuts will disproportionately affect rural hospitals and health.

Ballad Chairman and Chief Executive Office Alan Levine was just one hospital executive warning the public that the legislation would have consequences.

“The ‘One Big Beautiful Bill’ made us take a pause,” Levine said in a recent interview with Six Rivers Media while discussing the county hospital. “If

you spend \$50 million to build a hospital, that by the time it opens you’re going to face \$125 million in cuts, then you’re having to start to talk about if you have to possibly close hospitals, how wise was that decision?”

Both Deaton and Levine said the rebuild is estimated to cost around \$50 million. The original hospital, which opened Oct. 23, 2018, cost over \$30 million.

“If you’re obtaining money or funds from the federal government and from the state, you want to make sure that you’re prudent in the way you invest that money into the community,” Deaton said.

“[Medicaid cuts] would have significant impact on the ability to have a facility that has a positive margin moving forward with it.”

Having a positive margin is important, Deaton added, because that money goes back into providing salaries and increases for staff. With cuts coming in 2028, Deaton said that the whole situation is concerning.

“[It] could actually wipe out our entire bottom line,” he said. “When you look at making this type of investment to rebuild the facility, it’s hard to do that with that type of deficit you’re trying to make up.”

Is it possible that the rebuild won’t happen?

“I think it’s a real possibility,” Deaton said, “given what we’re facing with Medicaid cuts in the next two to three years.”

Levine said that making sure emergency services are available to the community is a top



BRANDON SMITH/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

The inside of Unicoi County Hospital on Nov. 15, 2024.

priority in the interim. Ballard already has an advanced urgent care clinic in Erwin to continue critical services.

“There’s a wide range of things you can look at outside of doing the hospital,” Deaton said. “But we’ll just have to see into the future how we can invest that money the best.”

As far as taking the next concrete step toward a new hospital, Deaton said he’d “love to do it tomorrow.” He said that the health care system has narrowed down a possible site for the facility, but plans are still ongoing.

“What we’re doing

right now is evaluating the services that we can do there, given the current state,” he said. “The other thing we’re really engaged on is working with our legislators at the state and especially at the federal level.”

Overall, the health care system remains committed to Unicoi County, Deaton emphasized.

“We love the people there and we want to continue to support them,” he said. “So we’re going to do everything we can to continue to push for building this hospital.”



CONTRIBUTED

Rescue teams sift through debris after Hurricane Helene.

## Rescue and recreation: River safety after the storm

By JOY MAZUR  
jmazur@sixriversmedia.com

When the flooding starts, it’s not just water filling the streets and buildings.

“You’re looking at diesel and gasoline, residential cleaning supplies and all types of things that aren’t normally floating down the river,” said Jessie Bishop, deputy fire chief of the Kingsport Fire Department. “There’s just so much unknown of what that is.”

Bishop is part of the District 1 swiftwater team, which includes

the Kingsport, Bristol and Johnson City fire departments. It also includes local emergency medical services and emergency management agencies. During times of crisis, the crews — which have received international recognition for their work during Helene — deploy for search and rescue on both land and water.

Helene demonstrated how much a natural disaster can distort a once-familiar landscape. From navigating water debris during rescue to new rapids months after, both rescue teams

and recreationists must stay cautious to stay safe in changing waters.

### RESCUE TEAMS TRAIN, USE SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

In the first few days after the storm, the swiftwater teams searched the water on boats. They used hand tools to pick up objects while wearing drysuits to stay safe from possible contaminants. While these suits also provide thermal protection, they’re



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | HEALTH

## Mental health supports remain for survivors

By JOY MAZUR

jmazur@sixriversmedia.com

In the first few weeks on the ground after Helene, Kaylee Murphy saw significant anxiety and grief.

Murphy, the regional community development director at Frontier Health Foundation, helped run the organization's relief efforts after the storm. She said that disrupted medication distribution and housing loss was particularly stressful for many.

"All of a sudden, people were out of their routines," she said. "A lot of people were cut off from their usual supports."

In the days and weeks after the hurricane, Frontier Health worked with Ballard Health, East Tennessee State University and the American Red Cross to send counselors out into the community. They provided "psychological first aid," shelter, food and medication to those left reeling.

The support is still ongoing. A year later, local communities are still grappling with grief. Ongoing issues of property and financial loss only add to the anxiety and stress that many feel.

## SURVIVORS STILL SEEK MENTAL SUPPORT

As this particular anniversary approaches, it may dredge up traumatic memories and feelings of anticipation and fear,



CONTRIBUTED

**Ballad Health Behavioral Health's Angie Tolley with Polar the therapy dog. Through a community partner, Tolley arranged for the dog to visit clinics throughout the region.**

said Angie Tolley, manager for Ballard Health Behavioral Health's clinical programs in outpatient services.

"[The flood] created permanent changes in our lives forever, and so there's great grief that goes along with that," she said. "It's important that people know that it's not a weakness, it's not a fault, it's not a disorder. There's not anything lacking with you. It's a normal response."

Counselors say there is still a need for mental support across Northeast Tennessee.

"I would say that many people still haven't processed a lot of what went on," Murphy said. "I think a lot of people have been so focused on rebuilding

or helping where they can, that sometimes they haven't given themselves permission to grieve."

As of mid-July, Frontier Health has referred 70 survivors for mental health services, outstripping its referrals to other services like crisis counseling and community services. Some of the most common reactions shown by survivors include:

- Extreme change in activity level
- Isolation/withdrawal
- Sadness
- Anxiety
- Fatigue, exhaustion
- Distressing dreams, nightmares
- Difficulty concentrating



CONTRIBUTED

**Ballad Health Behavioral Health set up stations throughout the region to help communities.**

## More Information

Those interested in receiving counseling after Helene can contact Frontier Health by calling 423-467-3600, emailing [fhinfo@frontierhealth.org](mailto:fhinfo@frontierhealth.org) or visiting any office (addresses can be found at <https://www.frontierhealth.org/locations/>).

Both Tolley and Murphy stress that feelings of grief are normal. Murphy's advice for those impacted is to turn to community.

"Stay connected," she said. "Because isolation, that only makes the burden heavier."

And for those seeking professional help, Frontier Health still offers free counseling for people affected by Helene. The ongoing program is funded by a Food City and United Way East Tennessee Highlands donation of \$25,000. Anyone interested can contact any of the organization offices and mention that they were affected by the storm.

"We want people to

not have to choose between taking care of something else and taking care of their mental health," Murphy said. "We want to make that a no-cost option for them to get support."

## COMMUNITIES TURN "PAIN INTO PURPOSE"

Tolley said her community and many others have events planned for the one-year anniversary of Helene. The motivation behind the meetings, she said, is to honor the day and make positive memories.

"It's important that we learn how to turn pain into purpose," she said. "You don't have to dread the one-year anniversary date. ...

We're going to make meaning in our community in order to walk forward and not be stuck in the past."

Employees from the Unicoi County Hospital, where flooding forced staff members and patients to evacuate from the rooftop, also have a support group. They used to meet more regularly, Tolley said, but now meet every other month. They're also preparing for the first anniversary date.

Tammy Albright, vice president and chief executive officer of Ballard Health Behavioral Health, added that in crisis, local groups are the most critical for immediate support.

"FEMA is a great support, but really they have a big ask," she said. "They can't get to people right away, but your community gets to you right away. ... It makes you proud to live where you live and to know that community means something."

One of the biggest insights from the disaster, Murphy said, was the strength of the community in the face of crisis.

"I saw people pull together like never before to help each other out," she said. "I think a huge part of therapy and mental health support in general, it isn't about treating symptoms. It's about amplifying that resilience that's already there."



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | ENVIRONMENT

# EPA talks Helene response in Northeast Tennessee

By **ALLISON WINTERS**  
awinters@sixriversmedia.com

ERWIN — The Environmental Protection Agency had a presence in Northeast Tennessee soon after Helene took its toll on the region.

Tennessee is part of EPA's Region 4, which includes Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and six federally-recognized tribes.

Kevin J. McOmer, professional engineer, was appointed to serve as the regional administrator in February of this year. He said he gained firsthand knowledge from what happened during Helene from colleagues who oversaw the response.

"I can tell you, having made personal visits to the region, Tennessee, Western North Carolina, Kentucky, we've got a pretty good overview of what had happened and what continues to happen with the recovery," McOmer said in an interview with Six Rivers Media. "These things take a long time, and we're still seeing a lot of work being done in the region."

### BACKGROUND

According to an email sent to Six Rivers Media on Nov. 6, 2024, from U.S. EPA Region 4 Press Officer Terry Johnson, the



CONTRIBUTED BY JASON FOSTER

**The wastewater treatment facility in Erwin was completely submerged after the flash flood from Helene on Friday, Sept. 27.**

agency had three staff personnel deployed to the area immediately following the aftermath of Helene.

Johnson said in the email that one person aided in providing technical input regarding hazmat issues from the storm, including for debris removal from Douglas Lake and the reservoir. Two EPA water/waste-water subject matter experts worked with state and federal partners to conduct wastewater system and utility system assessments.

According to Johnson, one of those experts focused on providing technical input to the Erwin wastewater treatment plant, which sustained "significant damage from the storm," he said at the time.

He added in his statement that additional staff at EPA's Atlanta headquarters

supported the efforts of those field personnel.

Katie Butler, EPA's water division director, said the agency's primary response to natural disasters comes when FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers ask them to be involved. She said for Helene, the EPA worked with state partners like Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation to coordinate their response — especially in terms of drinking water.

"We sent a wastewater subject matter expert to Erwin, Tenn., in Unicoi County, to assess the damage at the treatment plant and with the collection system," Butler said. "And when I say an expert, it was a series of folks who came in different deployments over time to help Erwin get back on track, clean out their

clarifiers and get back in operation."

### DOUGLAS LAKE

The EPA completed its role in debris removal from Douglas Lake at the end of July, the agency reported. More than 2,667 tons of general construction materials and debris were removed from the waterway.

Hunter Johnson, the acting division director of the EPA's superfund and emergency management division, said the agency was tasked by FEMA to provide technical support and a subject matter expert for the lake cleanup.

"They were dealing with a really unique and very difficult situation where there were multiple rivers with hazardous and non-hazardous material that was floating into the lake itself," Johnson said. "We were there to provide a

unique skill set we have, being able to segregate the hazardous from the non-hazardous material and we're providing that support with them."

Staff and volunteers logged more than 80,000 hours throughout the process of debris removal, the EPA website states. The agency's role was to "ensure hazardous material recovered from the lake cleanup were properly handled."

Johnson said over 2,000 orphan containers, which could mean anything from a small propane tank to a large cylinder drum, were collected from the lake by TVA.

"Today, Douglas Lake has good water quality and is again a popular family destination for hiking, camping, fishing, swimming and boating," the website states.

### WATER QUALITY

According to McOmer, the EPA has mobile labs and air monitoring systems available to test the quality of air, soil and water on site following a natural disaster.

"When you talk about drinking water, I like the fact that we were able to mobilize our mobile lab to the region and to test water to make sure it was safe for people to drink," he said. "I think that's a great resource that EPA has, and we actually have

two of those facilities available to respond."

According to Johnson, testing the quality of well water for homeowners was a major part of the EPA's response in the region. He said the agency also provided information on how to shock your well and get it retested later.

"We ran over 1,500 samples from private homeowners, just so that they knew whether their water was safe to drink at night," Johnson said. "These people have just had some of the worst days of their life with this disaster. If we could just provide them that one thing, just to know that their water was safe. We felt like we were helping them."

### STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

Butler said strong state and federal partnerships helped the EPA carry out its mission in the region. One subject matter expert was flown in on a helicopter provided by the military so they could assess a damaged wastewater system.

"Being able to bring those resources together is something that really enabled us in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina to access those communities where there may be one road to the community and that road is washed out," Butler said.

See **EPA**, Page H46



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | ENVIRONMENT

# No widespread wildlife loss after Helene, TWRA says

By JORGELINA MANNA-REA  
jmanna-rea@sixriversmedia.com

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency is working on a broad assessment of fish population recovery after Helene, with results expected before the end of the year.

While there was no widespread species loss after the storm, the agency shared in an email with Six Rivers Media, the broader assessment will have more information about fish populations in waterways affected by Helene.

In the last year, TWRA fisheries have been monitoring fish populations in Northeast Tennessee like brook trout, walleye and sauger.

“Early assessments from the Nolichucky and Pigeon Rivers have been encouraging,” said TWRA Public Information Officer Matthew Cameron.

TWRA also said there were no significant flood-related effects on sportfish in the Watauga, South Holston and Douglas reservoirs based on their monitoring for this year.

“All key biological indicators remain within the 10-year historical range,” Cameron said.

Biological indicators are organisms used to assess the conditions of an environment based on that environment’s usual benchmark data.



CONTRIBUTED BY THE TWRA.

**A large brook trout caught by the TWRA in Left Prong Hampton Creek in July.**



TWRA trap nets that were set up after the flood had “healthy numbers” of adult crappie and fish born within the year, the agency said.

Most fish species spawned in the spring, aside from brook trout, which helped skirt effects the September flooding could have had on reproduction season.

Brook trout typically spawn in October.

“Preliminary signs indicate that successful [brook trout] spawning occurred post-flood, but more definitive conclusions will be available once the full sampling season wraps up,” said Cameron.

Sampling will run through the end of September. From the brook trout streams sampled so far, there’s been evidence of reproduction from October 2024 in all of them.

“If the population decreased in density [or] numbers at these locations due to the hurricane or any other reason, they are on their way to rebuilding

their populations,” Cameron said.

The TWRA said that some wildlife death in the immediate aftermath of Helene was inevitable. Some fish were displaced, stranded in new pools of water or washed out of the waterway, but there were no reports of major fish kills or significant population declines. Stream fish populations are expected to recover quickly, they said.

In terms of the Doe and Watauga rivers, the agency conducted monitoring in March at stations downstream and said it did not find negative effects on the trout fisheries.

Hellbenders are another aquatic animal native to the region. It’s the largest salamander in North America. American Rivers, a nonprofit organization that advocates for clean rivers, was able to monitor some of the hellbender population as part of a dam removal project.

A number of hellbenders were found around the Shull’s Mill dam before its removal, said Erin McCombs, the group’s southeast conservation director. They were relocated to where the Ward’s Mill Dam had been freshly removed.

“It was going to kick off multi-year monitoring to see how these hellbenders that we took to a new home. How did they do? Well, then Helene hit Sept.

27, 2024 and so that really changed our experiment,” she said.

Dead hellbenders were found around the streets after the flooding, and it was months before hellbenders were spotted in the waters again, she said.

“After the storm, nobody had seen a live hellbender yet, and that was really difficult,” McCombs said.

American Rivers has been able to resume the biological monitoring they’ve been working on with the hellbenders. That work is currently wrapping up.

“We’re finding some hellbenders and we’ll have a better grasp of those population changes in the months to come as the data gets finalized and some of that gets crunched,” McCombs said.

McCombs added they’re hopeful the upcoming fall breeding season will be successful for the hellbender population.

When it comes to wildlife that spend most of their time out of the water, the TWRA said wildlife officers saw animals moving inland and fleeing the rising riverbanks. Those animals include beavers and other small mammals, as well as snakes and birds.

Bald eagles adjusted their feeding patterns, and bears climbed trees to avoid the floodwaters.

“Fortunately, steep

terrain in the affected counties allowed animals to escape quickly,” Cameron said.

“Had similar flooding occurred in flatter areas like West Tennessee, the wildlife impacts would likely have been far more severe.”

The storm did have an effect on birds like wood ducks that nest in tree cavities in riparian zones, the TWRA shared. Floodwaters damaged trees that would have been suitable for nesting, which means some birds may have relocated to find other places to nest.

Lick Creek Bottoms Wildlife Management Area in Greene County has seen a drop in wood ducks compared to previous years. Wildlife managers can offset the nesting issue with artificial nesting boxes.

When it comes to the bigger picture, biologists at the TWRA say it’s too early to know what the long-term effects of the storm’s flooding are.

Surveys and samplings are still to come before the end of the year, including a September sampling of the Doe River and an early December survey of walleye and sauger.

*Jorgelina Manna-Rea is a Report for America corps member covering environmental issues for Six Rivers Media.*



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | ENVIRONMENT

## How farmers are trying to recover after Helene

By JORGELINA MANNA-REA  
jmanna-rea@sixriversmedia.com

If you talked to Steve Scott a year ago, he would've never believed what he was seeing as he walked down one of his farms along the Nolichucky River.

Tomato plants were growing. Any other year, that would have been business as usual. But Helene changed everything when it flooded the farms along the Nolichucky.

He runs Scott's Strawberries with his wife, Fran, their two sons, Cody and Ryan, and daughter-in-laws, Jamie and Riley.

Working together, and with more than 160 other workers, is what pushed them through to this year.

"I told them, back then, 'I don't know what we're going to do.' And then that changed to, 'OK, we got to do something,'" Scott said.

Farms in Northeast Tennessee, especially along the Nolichucky watershed, are going through a recovery process unlike anything they've seen before.

Andy Brown owns a Christmas tree farm in Asheville. He's also the executive director of the Appalachian Resource Conservation and Development Council.

In 1998 he started an environmental consulting company, which he sold in 2012. He said he's always



JORGELINA MANNA-REA/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

Steve Scott at one of the Scott's Strawberries farms on Aug. 15. Helene changed everything when it flooded farms along the Nolichucky last September.



JORGELINA MANNA-REA/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

Scott's Strawberries workers prepare for strawberry planting at a greenhouse in Unicoi on Aug. 15.

worked in jobs that have to do with the environment, natural resources, fishing and hunting. Throughout that time, he's experienced at least two severe floods and three hurricanes in the mountains.

"This was a magnitude or two beyond anything we've ever seen," he said.

When there were flood risks in the past, Scott's Strawberries

had a protocol. They would move any equipment up from the river to avoid flooding — trucks, irrigation pumps and seven-to-eight-thousand pound forklifts.

But last year, those measures weren't enough for the water that swept through.

Almost no one in Unicoi County and Erwin could have expected what they found: machinery and

trucks flipped upside down. Sediment swept through and buried 48-inch long tomato sticks, leaving about four to five inches still above ground.

Scott and his family found a tractor buried underground through a few inches of machinery peaking out from under the sediment. Land lined with tomato plants was almost completely unrecognizable.

"I truly didn't know. I told 'em, I said 'I don't know what to do.' We had never experienced this before. We've had hailstorms, we've had floods. I mean, we lost 40 acres of tomatoes to a flood before. But we never lost everything we had," Scott said.

#### HOW SOIL HAS CHANGED

The soil Scott's Strawberries is

farming after the storm is sandy. It tracks with what researchers and soil scientists have found in the months after the flooding. Most fields have changed one of three ways: they're either rocky, sandy or silty.

"Rather than trying to go back down to the old flood plane, our advice is very much, 'Let's work with what we've got, and let's renovate the sediment,'" said Forbes Walker, professor and environmental soil specialist at University of Tennessee.

That's some of what Walker shared at a Flood Recovery Initiative Field Day in August. The recovery initiative is part of a partnership between the UT Institute of Agriculture, USDA, TNDA and the

Governor's Response and Recovery Fund.

Soil, vegetable and forage specialists at UT have all been working over the last year to try and see what will and won't grow in these new plots of soil.

Soil sample tests showed surprisingly ideal pH levels after the disaster, Walker shared. Most micronutrient levels were promising, except for some specific micronutrients like manganese. That's typical for sandy soils, which are not typical for Tennessee. Walker also said they don't have significant concerns about heavy metals in the soil after the storm.

The floods didn't just wash sediment off and onto farmlands. It also washed in diseases and

See **SOIL**, Page H45



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | ENVIRONMENT

## How waterways are faring one year after Helene

By JORGELINA MANNA-REA  
jmannan-rea@sixriversmedia.com

The immediate aftermath of a storm calls for caution when it comes to floodwaters. What do we know about the waterways that flooded a year ago and how they're doing now?

The Nolichucky and Watauga watersheds and tributaries were most affected by Helene in Northeast Tennessee.

#### RECREATION ON THE WATER

Lucas Gragg, Carter County EMA deputy director, said the agency is encouraging people to get back out on the water, while keeping an eye out for any remaining debris.

"[The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency] did a really good job working with contractors to get the waterways cleaned: the Doe, the Watauga, and all the tributaries around them that feed into them," Gragg said.

"But there's still going to be little ones and twos that pop up. Sticks, stumps, those types of things. So we really encourage boaters, swimmers, rafters, to just be mindful that yes, they cleaned them up really well, they look 100 times better, but there's still a chance of something being in the water."

In Unicoi County, the U.S. Forest Service has not yet granted rafting companies permits to do business along the

Nolichucky Gorge.

Unicoi County EMA Director Jimmy Erwin said almost all storm debris are removed from river, so it is a lot safer than it was six to eight months ago.

"With the Nolichucky River being our big tourist draw with the rafters and rafting companies, we want to get those rafters and get the people back on the river as soon as possible in a safe manner," Erwin said.

Individuals can go out onto the Nolichucky, but should do so at their own risk, Erwin said, whether they're swimming, tubing or rafting. He also said they should always be accompanied by another person and use a life jacket.

"The river has changed dramatically. Some places are wider, some places are more narrow," Erwin said. "Going forward, it'll be the rafters learning the river over and just being safe on it."

Those rafters include emergency responders and search and rescue teams.

"Use caution. The area that they may have been riding the river all their lives has changed," he said.

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency echoed those thoughts when it comes to recreating on the water. In a statement to Six Rivers Media, the agency said it urges anyone boating, wading fishing or paddling in



JORGELINA MANNA-REA/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

Six Rivers Media reporters kayaking on Watauga Lake on July 27. Officials urge keeping an eye out for any debris in the water.

flood-affected areas to use caution.

"River and stream channels may have changed significantly, and hidden obstacles could pose risks. If you can't see a clear path ahead, stop and assess before proceeding," the statement said.

Gragg also emphasized keeping an eye on any changes to the nature of the rivers and its tributaries, too.

"When you have a major storm or hurricane like we had, the rivers are going to change in some shape form or fashion," he said.

"One hydraulic that

might have always been here for the last 10 years is probably not there now. One rock that you've always had to fish around may not be there now."

#### WATER QUALITY

The TWRA shared that the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation conducted water sampling in rivers impacted by the flooding. They said the results showed water quality has returned to pre-Helene conditions.

See **WATER**, Page H45

## More Information

*Hurricane Helene's flooding drastically changed the nature of the Nolichucky River, according to the river guides who know it well:*

"Our once old friend, the Nolichucky, the one we had known for years, a wise old river that knew where to send her waters and had a strong sediment bed smoothing out her energy was gone," Trey Moore wrote in a blog post for American Whitewater on Oct. 2 about paddling on the river after Helene to assist with search and rescue.

"The new Nolichucky was presenting as a baby river, a young and energetic beast that we knew would be throwing all kinds of tantrums while she decided what to do with her energy, rolling rocks around, bouncing off of bedrock and slipping through abundant sieves and siphons in every boulder pile."



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER | ENVIRONMENT

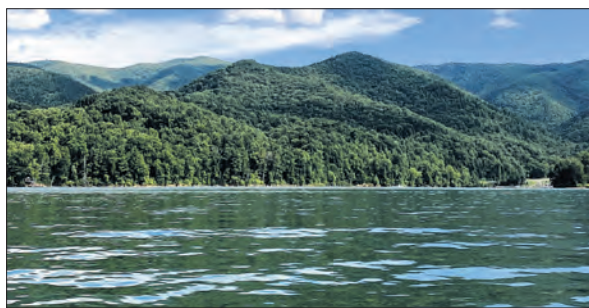
## WATER

From Page H44

TDEC lifted water contact advisories it issued after Hurricane Helene on Oct. 2, 2024 in January.

The Oct. 2 advisory included the Nolichucky, French Broad, Pigeon, Doe and Watauga River watersheds. TDEC said the advisories were “issued out of an abundance of caution and had not been based on any specific water quality data,” after the storm’s flooding.

Other organizations also conduct their own water sampling in the area and work with other local groups to do so. MountainTrue is a North Carolina-based nonprofit that’s been in contact with local groups like the Nolichucky Outdoor Recreation Association and the Nolichucky Watershed Alliance to conduct



JORGELINA MANNA-REA/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

### Watauga Lake as seen on July 27.

water sampling, organize cleanups, paddling and outreach events.

“One thing the hurricane has done is brought people together. New groups have formed, which has been really cool to see how they’ve been able to mobilize and really be impactful since then,” said Anna Alsobrook, French Broad Riverkeeper at MountainTrue, who also oversees the Nolichucky.

The data from their regularly scheduled water sampling is catered toward recreational monitoring,

which focuses on bacteria levels. That data goes into Swim Guide, a portal where watershed groups across the world can upload water quality data they’ve collected.

Testing for bacteria levels is a regular occurrence for groups like MountainTrue that try to provide safety information around water recreation, whether or not a flooding disaster has happened.

Bacteria testing is in addition to testing for toxins and pollutants, which TDEC tests for after severe flooding,

when septic systems, industries or fuel systems could have flooded the waterways.

“The waterways cleared pretty quickly of the heavy kind of intense toxins, diesels, and petroleum [post-Helene],” Alsobrook said.

“There were spots where the sediments held on to a little bit of those, but those typically degrade in time and in the sun. And those levels were so small, we weren’t worried about that.”

Alsobrook said when it comes to bacteria pollution, river systems are so dynamic that cleanliness depends on where you access the waterway.

“Look at the color of the water, if it’s that chocolate milk color. You might want to go somewhere else or wait a day or two for things to settle out,” she said.

Andy Hill is the High Country director and Watauga Riverkeeper for MountainTrue. He said

the storm amplified their work around water quality monitoring, which was especially important for communities and people like Hill who rely on well water.

Their group offered free well testing after Helene in partnership with local health departments.

“Helene exposed some vulnerabilities in our aging infrastructure and things like wastewater treatment plants, septic systems,” Hill said.

He also said they’ve seen rapid improvements in water quality since the storm.

### FISH CONSUMPTION

Short-term flooding isn’t expected to significantly affect levels of contamination in fish tissue, according to the agency — but people should still abide by any fish consumption advisories that were in effect before the flooding.

“TDEC has no reason

to believe fish consumption is unsafe,” the TWRA said in a statement.

However, any pre-existing fish consumption advisories remain in effect and can be viewed online on TDEC’s website.

The TWRA said fish collections for contaminant testing are planned through the fall at the Douglas, Fort Loudoun and Boone reservoirs.

“Southern Appalachia’s people take a great deal of pride in where they live. There’s a real sense of place here,” Hill said.

“Communities and individuals, they really rally around the river and treat it with respect and reverence and take care of it. So we’ve seen remarkable recovery and investment.”

*Jorgelina Manna-Rea is a Report for America corps member covering environmental issues for Six Rivers Media.*

## SOIL

From Page H44

weeds from North Carolina that farmers in Tennessee may not have had to deal with before, according to Annette Wszelaki, UT professor and commercial vegetable extension specialist.

Farmers are also adjusting to the soil’s new texture, whether they’re farming sandy or silty land.

“We feel confident that we can work with you guys to identify what the sediments are and how we can help you do whatever you



JORGELINA MANNA-REA/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

### Debris from Helene flooding at a farm in Unicoi Aug. 15.

need to do,” Bruno Pedreira, director of plant sciences at UTIA, told attendees at the Flood Recovery Initiative Field Day in August.

### COMMUNITY RESOURCES AFTER THE STORM

The ARCD, which has been working in the

Appalachian community for more than 30 years, was able to serve as a hub of resources for farmers affected by the storm. They raised about \$150,000 for farmers’ immediate needs in the weeks after from organizations like Farm Aid,

the East Tennessee Foundation and the First Horizon Bank foundation, along with about 30 other individuals.

That money was dispersed in two different rounds of funding: the first in small, \$200 to \$300 installments. The second was \$2,000 to \$10,000 grants for any other costs that weren’t covered by government assistance.

Tractor Supply, a farm supply company, also helped give \$100,000 of fencing, feed and warm coats to local farmers.

People also came to ARCD with questions about how to stabilize their banks and what to

do with their fields, Brown said. Farmers came to them saying what used to be lush bottomland with topsoil was now cobble and rocks. Others were filled with sand and silt.

Scott’s Strawberries saw both sides of that coin. They’ll likely never use one of the fields to farm again. All that’s left of it is cobble. There’s a small island of soil, about four feet high. A memory of a field that used to be.

For the fields that were left sandy, Scott said a lot of organic matter washed away. He was surprised when they conducted soil sampling

and found that they would be able to work with what they had.

Last year, more than 92% of their tomatoes flooded. Out of the 360 acres that did flood, they’re hopeful to recover 300 acres for this season.

“People, after the flood, started saying, ‘Well with the soil, you’re not gonna be able to do this, you’re not gonna be able to do that.’ Well, you know, it don’t matter, because it’s all we got. We got to make it work,” Scott said.

*Jorgelina Manna-Rea is a Report for America corps member covering environmental issues for Six Rivers Media.*



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | ENVIRONMENT

# Could another Helene happen? Meteorologist explains lessons from the storm

By REBEKAH MCNERNEY  
rmcnerney@sixriversmedia.com

When Helene barreled into the Southern Appalachians last September, it left behind catastrophic flooding and a historic trail of damage.

For many in Northeast Tennessee, the storm felt like a once-in-a-lifetime disaster.

Meteorologist David Hotz with the National Weather Service in Morristown said the storm was “essentially a historical type event” for the region, bringing a “rare amount of rainfall.”

“On the North Carolina side of the mountains we saw 20 to 26 inches of rain in a very short period of time,” Hotz said. “That rainfall eventually made its way into East Tennessee through the headwaters of rivers like the French Broad and the Nolichucky, which is what caused so much of the devastating flooding here.”



JORGELINA MANNA-REA/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**A look at the inside of the National Weather Service field office in Morristown.**

What made matters worse, he said, was that Helene wasn't the only storm system at play. A “predecessor rain event” just days before Helene's arrival had already saturated the ground and swelled local rivers. That primed the soil for more dangerous runoff and amplified the flooding once Helene's rains arrived, Hotz said.

The Appalachian Mountains sometimes shield parts of Northeast Tennessee from storms, depending on the path a system takes, Hotz said. But in Helene's case, the storm cut directly up the spine of the mountains, which then funneled tropical moisture into

terrain where steep slopes and narrow valleys make flash flooding more likely.

“Sometimes the mountains can help block rainfall, but with Helene, the orientation of the track meant they actually funneled and intensified the impacts,” Hotz said.

As Helene approached, the National Hurricane Center tracked the system while local National Weather Service offices, like Morristown, issued alerts tailored to communities in its path.

In East Tennessee, that meant high wind warnings, flash flood

watches, and eventually the highest-level flood warnings the office has ever issued.

“We issued the most catastrophic flash flood warnings we've ever done,” Hotz said. “That was especially in Unicoi County and Erwin, where the floodwaters had reached historic levels.”

Flash flood warnings come in three tiers — base, considerable and catastrophic. The catastrophic level, rarely used, signals the potential for widespread destruction and automatically triggers the emergency alert system. Helene pushed warnings into that top tier more

than once, Hotz said.

Still, even the best forecasts face a challenge: convincing residents that worst-case scenarios are possible.

“There's sometimes a perception issue of people realizing that the unthinkable is about to happen,” Hotz said. “It can be hard for folks to believe until it's right on top of them. In Unicoi County, when you're talking about a 30-foot wall of water, that's hard to imagine until you see it.”

Hotz said it isn't his expertise to weigh in on long-term climate change impacts, but he emphasized the importance of staying weather-aware, especially during hurricane season, when remnants of tropical systems can sweep inland.

The weather service is also expanding tools to better forecast and communicate risks. One of those is flood inundation mapping, which models how rising waters could spread into specific communities.

Morristown's office began using the tool just before Helene hit.

“That ability is continuing to improve,” Hotz said. “It gives us a better way to tell emergency managers exactly what areas could be hit hard.”

For residents, Hotz stressed preparation. That means knowing whether your home sits in a floodplain, having an evacuation plan and paying attention when warnings might escalate.

“Once we're issuing warnings for your area, you need to be ready to go,” he said.

Hotz also said that NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information is preparing a “story map” focused on Helene's impacts in the Southern Appalachians, expected later this fall.

“I think it will be a great tool to help communities understand the storm and prepare for any future ones.”

## EPA

From Page H41

McOmber said FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers have been great partners during the response and recovery phases of Helene in

Northeast Tennessee, since all share a goal of being helpful.

Butler gave specific credit to TDEC who were the primary responders on a state level for water issues following Helene.

“We just wanted to say that they stood up

their response, from my perspective, on water tracking, drinking water and wastewater utilities remarkably fast and did a remarkable job at it,” she said.

### MOVING FORWARD

Nearly a year later,

Butler said the EPA's assigned missions have been completed — but their work doesn't stop there. The agency has a recovery expert working to serve EPA Region 4's impacted communities, including in Tennessee.

Johnson said there will probably be EPA personnel working on Helene for years or decades moving forward. Butler said the agency is monitoring the long-term effects of Helene on local waterways like the Nolichucky River.

“We continue to work with our federal partners as they are navigating getting things back in line and providing our expertise in those situations,” she said. “We've certainly heard a lot about it and we are tracking it.”



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | ENVIRONMENT

## Restoring riparian zones after Helene

By JORGELINA MANNA-REA  
jmanna-rea@sixriversmedia.com

Empty riverbanks and streambanks open up another set of issues for the communities around them: soil erosion. Without the vegetation that was in place before the storm, streambanks are much weaker against the flow of the waterway by which it resides.

That increases the risk of sediment pollution and future flooding.

But it's not a one-size-fits-all approach — each bank faces its own set of issues and the scale at which restoration needs to varies.

"Every piece of property is different, depending on your soil and how the water is flowing and the damage that was done," said Ashley Kite-Rowland, program coordinator at the Tennessee Department of Agriculture's Division of Urban and Community Forestry.

The division is trying to bridge communication between the entities involved in riparian zone restoration. They're facilitating meetings with groups in Cocke County to streamline the exchange of information about what kinds of funding, labor or expertise is available and who is eligible for it.

"How can we work together to really get things done, and to track what is getting



JORGELINA MANNA-REA/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Andrea Ludwig, soil scientist and biosystems engineer at the University of Tennessee's Institute of Agriculture, shares information about bank stabilization at a Flood Recovery Initiative Field Day in Limestone Aug. 20.**

done?" she said. "If we see that there is a need, okay, which entity here at our meeting can help with that?"

Kite-Rowland hopes to facilitate similar conversations in other Northeast Tennessee counties. The meetings include representatives from the Natural Resources Conservation Service at the USDA and TDEC, individuals and other organizations that are involved in restoration work.

"Working in every community is going to be different. What's going on in every county is going to be different and there are different long term recovery groups," the Urban and Community Forestry Program Coordinator Ashley Kite-Rowland said. "But there are some things that are the same."

Applications for community tree-planting

grants from the Urban and Community Forestry Program opened Aug. 25. Applications close Sept. 30.

More funding opportunities will be available for stream bank stabilization later this year through the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act.

The grants through the Urban and Community Forestry Program are available to municipalities and nonprofit organizations, but not private landowners. However, grant recipients can work on private land.

Part of the information exchange that Kite-Rowland stressed is how to ensure the vegetation that is being planted — or growing back on its own — is healthy for the native habitat.

"Now vegetation is growing back in a lot of places, which I'm thankful for. But in some of those cases it's

invasive species, which we'll have to deal with later," Kite-Rowland said.

Andrea Ludwig, a soil scientist and biosystems engineer at the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, said people working on bank stabilization will have to keep an eye on invasive species washed in from North Carolina.

"We got a lot of things from North Carolina. We got the water, we got their sediment. We also have their seabank of Japanese knotweed," Ludwig shared at a flood recovery educational event hosted by UTIA, the USDA and the Tennessee Department of Agriculture Aug. 20.

Ludwig also shared some things to consider in riparian restoration: whether or not vegetation is naturally regenerating, how much intervention is neces-

sary, what kinds of permits are needed for restoration work, and what resources might people already have on-hand.

UTIA has partnered with the TVA and the Appalachian Resource Conservation and Development Council to help in the process too, for funding and crowdsourcing information about resources and areas that need work.

"We have a team of volunteers that we are recruiting, and these volunteers will be working to actually plant stream banks with native trees, grasses, shrubs, things like that, and do some minimal grading," said Andy Brown, ARCD director.

Bank stabilization won't just involve replanting native species. It will also depend on the slope of the bank after the flooding. Brown said ARCD is working closely with experts and agencies to make sure the work they're doing is properly executed, abiding by technical specifications.

"We're working with the NRCS and [UTIA] experts. We're tied at the hip. So it's not just 'hey, let's show up with all these good hearted people to plant trees,'" said Brown.

"There's certain things [to consider], like, if you have an undercut bank or a vertical bank, maybe that's

not the place for us to work right now. Or if we do work there, we need to probably grade it back somewhat."

Brown said the ARCD partnership between agencies is also important for when needs are out of their scope, and they can refer landowners to government programs that can address their issues.

The ARCD is also working with local organizations, like the Nolichucky Watershed Alliance, planning tree-planting days for bank stabilization. The Nolichucky Watershed Alliance has tentatively planned a volunteer tree-planting day for Oct. 25.

The Division of Urban and Community Forestry hopes to start working with people and make a plan for their specific needs in time for planting season from November through March. If people aren't able to hire contracting professionals to conduct the work, Kite-Rowland said they want to be a resource to find volunteer work to make it happen.

"We'll be getting these projects going and hopefully getting trees and plants out to people and getting volunteers engaged to do these projects," she said.

*Jorgelina Manna-Rea is a Report for America corps member covering environmental issues for Six Rivers Media.*



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | BUSINESS



FILE PHOTO

Matt Moses is the managing partner of USA Raft. He said it was unlikely USA Raft would be back in 2026.

## Nolichucky River rafters share business outlooks after Helene

By OLIVIA PERRY

operry@sixriversmedia.com

The remnants of Helene still linger within the Nolichucky River.

A year ago, the river rapids, so frequently traversed and used by the handful of rafting businesses in Erwin, became something even seasoned outdoor recreationists weren't prepared for. The water's unpredictability claimed homes, businesses, a hospital — and multiple lives.

### USA RAFT ADVENTURE RESORT

Matt Moses, managing partner with USA Raft Adventure Resort, had the river reflected in his sunglasses as he overlooked the water of the Nolichucky from the ridge of what remained of USA Raft's stomping grounds. What was once a place for



OLIVIA PERRY/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

USA Raft Adventure Resort still sees the remnants of damage from Helene despite it being a year since the disaster.

tourists and outdoor enthusiasts to camp, explore and enjoy white-water rafting within the Nolichucky had been swept away during Helene's destruction.

"Not only did I lose a lot of land here, and cabins and campers, at least eight to 10 of my staff lived in

campers at my other campground, and they're all gone," Moses said. "We immediately shut down, and that was 80-something jobs that were boom, done, and a way of life for all those people. It's devastating."

See **RAFTERS**, Page H56

## Jobs still being recovered from Helene's impact

By AARON BARLOW

abarlow@sixriversmedia.com

The personal impacts of Helene were immense, but so were the professional impacts.

According to data from the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 3,101 residents of Northeast Tennessee made an initial claim of unemployment in October 2024. For perspective, the number of initial claims in September 2024 was 715, followed by 1,220 in November 2024.

Uncoi County saw the biggest spike; the unemployment rate was 4.3% in September 2024, and 5.8% in October 2024.

"We saw dozens of businesses sustain significant physical damage, displacing hundreds of workers almost overnight," said Brian Decker, Business and Workforce director for TDLWD'S Northeast Workforce Services Division.

A year later, there are still people who haven't been able to return to their jobs. Funds from a National Dislocated Worker Grant are helping combat this.

The U.S. Department of Labor gave the first part of the grant to Tennessee in October, and the second part in May. Decker said his division received \$3,038,994 and awarded it to the First Tennessee Development District.

Around \$1 million has been spent so far. The grant ends in September 2026, and

Decker said FTDD is still recruiting recipients.

The funds can be given to businesses to help pay for "the labor costs involved in clean-up, recovery, repair and rebuilding activities from damages associated with Helene," according to Decker.

Additionally, "the grant can pay individuals who lost their jobs due to Helene — to do clean-up, repair, recovery and rebuilding work," according to Decker.

Lisa Evans, FTDD's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Program director, said that individuals are frequently assigned to clean up the businesses they used to work for. She estimated that around 90% of these workers will return to their previous roles once the clean-up is done.

Businesses and individuals can also request job skills training under the grant. However, Evans said only one request has been made so far. That request was from a water recreation company that wants to teach its former workers water rescue skills.

Lottie Ryans, FTDD'S director of Workforce & Literacy Initiatives, said that different counties saw different types of workers impacted.

"Unicoi was hit hard because they had a lot of tourism affected, as did Carter County, and in certain parts of Washington County we had farms affected," said Ryans.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | BUSINESS

## Storytelling president reflects on 2024 festival shutdown

By **KIMBERLY HARR**  
kharr@sixriversmedia.com

**JONESBOROUGH** — The International Storytelling Center is moving forward with preparations for this year's National Storytelling Festival after last year's event was canceled in the aftermath of Helene.

Michael Carson, former president of the International Storytelling Center, said in August the decision in 2024 to cancel came down to a lack of safety measures.

"The damage from the storm was severe," Carson said. "The first responders in the town of Jonesborough really needed to focus on the community and focus on people affected by the storm. It left us in a position where we would not have any public safety or services if we didn't cancel."

Carson said the cancellation took a toll on multiple levels, from staffing to programming.

"From a staff perspective, we had already set up for the festival, and we were probably four days away when we canceled, so it was obviously a morale blow but also a major financial loss," Carson said. "For storytellers, many had to cancel their flights or change travel itineraries, and for shopkeepers on Main Street, many of them earned a lot of their revenue during the festival, so it affected us on three dif-



FILE PHOTO

Organizers are introducing new programs, safety plans and expanded outreach to the 2025 National Storytelling Festival, Oct. 3 to 5.

ferent levels."

Carson said the community impact of Helene last year stretched beyond just the performers and staff.

"For the town of Jonesborough, it's the largest tourist event of the year, with about 8,500 people who did not attend when it was canceled — which meant money that was not spent locally," Carson said. "Many had ordered supplies to sell and had to return items, just like we did with our books and merchandise."

In the immediate



Carson

aftermath, Carson said the center worked to keep storytelling alive in other forms by contributing to recovery outreach and hosting other events.

"We continued with our program Storytelling Live, and through our storytellers we held a fundraiser called Storytellers' Give Back that raised funds for East Tennessee United Way," he said. "It was the very first event at the Jackson Theatre after it opened. It sold out, and it was really inspirational."

Carson said the cen-

ter's outreach aims to extend beyond Tennessee in the coming weeks.

"We've been prioritizing supporting storytellers in Western North Carolina, who were even more affected by Helene," Carson said in August, saying they were to help co-sponsor a fundraiser for musicians there on Sept. 21.

In the months since Helene, Carson said the center has leaned on its year-round programming to keep audiences engaged.

"Storytelling Live is actually our most attended activity, even more so than the festival," he said. "We had about 11,000 attendees

last year, and it's been improving morale for us, as well as the morale of our audience and the community."

Despite the setback, Carson said most of the performers originally scheduled will still take the stage at the upcoming National Storytelling Festival, scheduled Oct. 3 to 5.

"We kept our same lineup," Carson said. "Almost all the tellers, except for a few from overseas, are still coming. Out of 23 scheduled, we have 20 returning."

He said the planning for this year's festival comes with some new precautions, as well.

"We're putting in a

preparedness plan, with alternative venues in case something happens," Carson said. "If there is a cancellation this year, we won't cancel — we'll actually move to different venues."

As far as the goals ahead for the ISC, Carson said they are both local and far-reaching.

"The hope is that our audience will come back, that it will continue to grow and that we can work with other festivals and expand virtually," Carson said. "We will be streaming on YouTube this year and have been talking to Radio Bristol about broadcasting as well."

The 2025 festival will also introduce new themes and special events.

"We have a legacy series with a former prisoner of war who was Sen. John McCain's roommate, and Donald Davis will be interviewed by his three sons," Carson said. "We're also collaborating with Brews and Tunes in Jonesborough for the first time as well as adding a story slam."

Carson said the upcoming festival represents an optimistic turning point for the ISC and the community.

"Overall, it's like a rebirth after canceling last year," he said. "We just want people to come out for the town, for the community and for our storytellers."



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | BUSINESS

## Unicoi Chamber reflects on 2024 Apple Festival cancellation

By KIMBERLY HARR  
kharr@sixriversmedia.com

Nearly a year after Helene, Unicoi County Chamber of Commerce officials looked back on the difficult decision to cancel one of the community's biggest traditions — the 2024 Unicoi County Apple Festival.

Chamber Executive Director Amanda Delp said the choice to call off the festival came only days after the storm.

"It was a very difficult decision that we had to make, but it was also an obvious decision that we needed to cancel at the time," Delp said. "We knew first and foremost we had community members at that time that were still missing, that search and rescue and officials were still actively searching for. We did not want to divert any attention or any efforts away from that."

The festival, which Delp said has drawn more than 100,000 visitors to downtown Erwin in previous years, relies heavily on local emergency services and municipal departments. Delp said it was clear those resources needed to remain focused on recovery.

"We rely heavily on our first responders, as well as our police department, fire department and street



FILE PHOTO

The 2025 Unicoi County Apple Festival will return on Friday, Oct. 3 and Saturday, Oct. 4 after being canceled in 2024.



BRYAN STEVENS/SIX RIVERS MEDIA  
Amanda Delp, executive director of the Unicoi County Chamber of Commerce, announced the 2024 Apple Festival was canceled.

department," she said. "We knew moving forward with the festival would put an addi-

tional burden on those folks."

She said transportation issues also factored into the cancellation.

"I-26 was essentially closed, even over in western North Carolina," Delp said. "We knew that just getting people to the festival would be difficult. And then once they got here, there were so many affected areas, parking would have been an issue."

Despite knowing it was the right call, Delp said the loss carried a heavy emotional and economic toll.

"We know what an economic impact the

festival has on the community, on the vendors, on the businesses, and we knew the flood was going to cause all those businesses and organizations to take an economic hit," she said. "We knew losing the festival would have an added economic cost, and we wish we could've avoided that, but looking at both sides, we knew the decision had to be made."

The chamber also shifted its role in the weeks following Helene. Delp recalled she and Tourism Director Cathy Huskins set aside fes-

tival preparations to join local relief efforts.

"The morning of the flood, we were here in the office preparing for the festival," Delp said. "It was going to start just six days later. Once we got out and saw the devastation, we knew we had to help in some way, so we tried to fill in wherever we were best needed."

She said their first stop was at the county animal shelter, which had been evacuated.

"The animals had been brought up to Food City, and we helped get the animals in homes and placed so they would be taken

care of until they could find permanent homes," Delp said.

She said the chamber team also worked at the county's emergency command centers and continued filling gaps where needed, but on a personal level, she said the cancellation was "devastating."

"We knew in our heart that that's what we needed to do, and we knew in our minds it was the best decision for our community, but actually writing out that press release, posting it, getting up and making the announcement at the press conference — it broke my heart," she said.

Delp worried about the impact on the festival's reputation after a previous cancellation in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but she said vendors responded with overwhelming support after the storm.

"They knew that our county and our community was really hurting after the flood, and they understood the reason for the cancellation," Delp said. "That eased the hurt just a little bit, knowing that our vendors were so gracious."

Delp said the anniversary of the storm will also be marked by reflection. The Unicoi County Apple Festival will return this year on Friday, Oct. 3 and Saturday, Oct. 4.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | LEGAL ISSUES

# Impact Plastics faces no criminal charges after deaths

By **BRANDON PAYKAMIAN**  
brandonp@sixriversmedia.com

ERWIN — The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation found no evidence of criminal wrongdoing in the deaths of six Impact Plastics employees during flooding from Helene in September 2024, according to state officials.

District Attorney General Steven Finney released the findings in July after a monthslong investigation into allegations that management stopped workers from leaving the Erwin facility as floodwaters rose in the area.

The investigation, which included interviews with nearly 30 witnesses and video evidence, determined that Impact Plastics

CEO Gerald O'Connor dismissed employees at 10:35 a.m., leaving them enough time to evacuate the area, according to a news release. No charges have since been filed against the company or management, despite continued public outcry.

"Within these interviews [with witnesses], no evidence was established to substantiate the claim that the employees were told they were prohibited from leaving or threatened with termination for leaving as the floodwater rose," a news release from Finney stated.

Allegations against O'Connor and Impact Plastics quickly spread across social media immediately after the flooding, stating that

O'Connor and other management refused to allow employees to leave the facility in Unicoi County.

The news release added that "attempts to interview other Impact Plastics employees were unsuccessful due to lack of cooperation or response." In a video released shortly after the incident, O'Connor promised to cooperate fully with investigators and also alleged that his family had received death threats over allegations.

The claims moved Finney to request the TBI investigation in October, which led investigators to discover that employees had a window of slightly more than an hour to access evacuation routes, according



BRYAN STEVENS/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation concluded no criminal wrongdoing by Impact Plastics management in the deaths of six employees during September 2024's flooding.**

to official accounts.

The Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Administration also conducted a parallel workplace safety inves-

tigation into the company's protocol, which concluded in April with similar findings. The case has since been closed with no further action planned.

State officials declined to comment or provide further information about the incident. Civil actions by the families of the deceased are ongoing.

## Wrongful death lawsuit still hangs over Impact Plastics, CEO

From staff reports

ERWIN — Impact Plastics, after almost a year, is still the subject of the only county or federal civil suit in the wake of Helene.

Alexa Peterson's suit against Impact and CEO Gerald O'Connor paints a picture of her father Johnny Peterson and other Impact employees having to work on Sept. 27 as multiple flood warning and emergency cell phone alerts were received as early as 8:50 a.m. that day by employees and company officials.

Johnny Peterson was one of six employees whose bodies were found downstream after the rising Nolichucky River swept them from a semi trailer parked near the Impact premises.

Before Peterson and other employees were released from work, the suit alleges, O'Connor and other Impact officials had gathered company documents and left the building under stealth.

According to Unicoi County Circuit Court records, there has been no action on the suit since a December

response by Impact Plastics attorneys disputing Alexa Peterson's claims of negligence by company officials.

Peterson's suit includes claims that O'Connor and company CFO Susan Chambers delayed closing the plant even as Unicoi County Schools and another nearby business closed Sept. 27 for flooding concerns.

Besides claims of various acts of negligence the day of the flood, the suit alleges that Impact Plastics was located in a federal- and state-designated flood plain.

The suit includes details from Johnny Peterson's cell texts, videos and photos of flooding inside Impact, floodwater-isolated vehicles in the parking lot and floodwaters sweeping around the Impact building and the semi trailer where he climbed for escape.

Two final texts from Johnny Peterson — after he left the building — were also cited in the suit: "I love you allllll" to Alexa at 1:17 p.m. and "Not for Long" at 1:27 p.m. when Johnny's father texted him to ask if he was alright.

The suit alleges three counts of wrongful death against O'Connor and the company for negligence in requiring employees to work when a probable danger existed with Helene, failure to maintain an emergency action plan, and premises liability.

Claiming that Impact and O'Connor's negligence and actions are criminal under Tennessee law, the suit argues that no limits should be placed on non-economic damages from Johnny Peterson's death.

Alexa Peterson seeks

a minimum of \$25 million in damages and other court-determined relief through a jury trial.

The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation cleared the company of criminal wrongdoing in July, after looking into how Peterson and five other employees died after they tried to escape rising Nolichucky River floodwaters around the company.

In October, O'Connor stated that no company employees, to the company's knowledge, died on the Impact premises on Sept. 27.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | LEGAL ISSUES

# TEMA describes safeguards against fraud in Helene relief efforts

By **REBEKAH MCNERNEY**  
rmcnerney@sixriversmedia.com

As Tennessee communities continue to recover from Helene, state emergency officials are urging residents to be cautious of scams and fraudulent attempts to get disaster aid.

"During any disaster, there are bad actors that try to obtain information from survivors," stated Kristen Coulter, communications director for the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency. "This often looks like individuals pretending to represent FEMA. We addressed this early and often by reminding the public that FEMA personnel will have an official badge and will never charge for disaster assistance, inspections, or help filling out applications."

TEMA said the state typically does not verify individual needs directly.

"We collaborate with local communities, leaders and organizations to support their identified needs and processes," Coulter said.

Following Helene, the state provided aid through the Governor's Response

and Recovery Fund, which offered grants to businesses, farmers, forest landowners and local government agencies to address damage caused by the storm.

"This fund was the first of its kind in Tennessee," she said.

To prevent misinformation, TEMA used social media posts, news releases, flash reports and news conferences.

"We also amplified information from partners on how to detect scams following a disaster," Coulter stated.

The agency works closely with Tennessee VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) and local nonprofits to deliver relief.

"Members of Tennessee VOAD are embedded in the State Emergency Operations Center when an event occurs," Coulter stated. "They receive information in real time and can coordinate requests for volunteer management, home repair, feeding, and sheltering. These partnerships allow us to share resources and leverage local expertise to address community needs."

Shortly after Helene hit East Tennessee, the Tennessee Attorney General's Office issued a warning urging residents to report scammers and price gougers.

"While most Tennesseans are showing the best of the Volunteer spirit to our neighbors devastated by Helene, a few bad actors always slime out of the woodwork to take advantage of those in need," Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti stated in an Oct. 1, 2024, release.

"Price gouging and scamming vulnerable people after disasters is not only repulsive, it's illegal. My office will not hesitate to enforce Tennessee's consumer protection laws..."

The AG's Division of Consumer Affairs offered guidance to avoid scams, including verifying contractor licensing, avoiding upfront payment for home repairs, and researching charities before donating.

Complaints about scams or price gouging can be submitted to the Division of Consumer Affairs online or by phone at (615) 741-4737.

# Did the state use eminent domain following Helene?

By **BEN SMITH**  
bensmith@sixriversmedia.com

NASHVILLE — The phrase "eminent domain" made ripples throughout Northeast Tennessee during the weeks following Helene.

The phrase refers to the government's power to seize property from private landowners — even against their wishes — as long as the property is seized for a "public use" and its owner is provided fair compensation.

It's a frightening possibility, said state Rep. Renea Jones, R-Unicoi, a self-described proponent of property rights. And it frightened many who lived along major highways in the region, who in late October saw their names listed in public notices stating the state "seeks to acquire [their] land."

Jones clarified that the state was only issuing construction easements. The voluntary contracts allowed the Tennessee Department of Transportation access to private land in order for road repairs to get underway.

Property owners were compensated for the temporary use of their land, which extended only 100 feet in both directions from the centerline of the highway.

Typically, these easements are acquired through a right-of-way process, which under normal circumstances, can take years. Jones said there wasn't time for that.

"You had done it the proper way, that river road wouldn't be open today," she said.

However, many residents did not receive these easements for a number of reasons — either they did not see the public notice; or the mail service could not reach their homes due to the damaged roads; or, their mailboxes had been washed away.

For those cases, totaling at least 45 along state Route 81/107, an emergency order of possession was filed legally allowing the state temporary access to certain areas of land along the highways without requiring approval from

their owners — approval that the state could not wait to receive.

So, was eminent domain used by the state during Helene? The short answer is yes, but with a caveat.

The emergency order issued to residents who did not sign the construction easements is part of the state's broader power of eminent domain. However, the order does use the state's full extent of its power. It did not repossess property; it only allowed road construction crews temporary access to the land.

So, while the order was technically couched within a broader power of eminent domain, there were no properties that were permanently transferred from private to state control.

"You have to use that code when you do something like this, because that's just the way legal jargon works," Jones said. "The only thing that was utilized was construction easements on both the river road project and the road project in Unicoi."

Residents subject to the emergency order of possession were still compensated, just as they would have been had they been able to or chose to sign the easements.

Whether the state had used its power of eminent domain was the topic of a December 2024 meeting between TDOT, local officials and Johnson County residents living along U.S. 421.

"We are not widening the road, not taking your home, we don't want your property," were the first words out of the mouth of TDOT's Director and Assistant Chief Engineer of Region 1 Steve Borden.

Jones said she was wary of the word herself when she first heard it. But she soon understood it was necessary — without roads, supplies could not be delivered to certain places, and the transportation of everything in the area slows down as more cars are crammed into detour routes.

"For this situation, I think it might have been the only way to handle it, to be able to get those roads built back as quick as we did," said Jones.



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER | LEGAL ISSUES

# American Whitewater, American Rivers challenge Nolichucky mining

By **BRANDON PAYKAMIAN**  
brandonp@sixriversmedia.com

Federal agencies seek to dismiss a lawsuit challenging railroad repair work and mining in North Carolina's Nolichucky River Gorge, just across the border from Unicoi County, after Helene, arguing in recent court filings that environmental groups lack standing to challenge the emergency repairs.

According to court documents, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service recently filed a reply brief defending their motion for partial dismissal in the federal case brought by American Whitewater and American Rivers against CSX Transportation's post-hurricane reconstruction efforts. The lawsuit was initially filed Nov. 18, 2024, in the Western District of North Carolina's Asheville Division.

The outcome of the ongoing case could influence how federal agencies handle emergency permitting for infrastructure repairs following natural disasters, with environmental concerns in mind. American Whitewater and American Rivers are



ALLIE BYNUM

The Nolichucky has long been a major destination for kayakers and outdoor enthusiasts across the world.



AMERICAN WHITEWATER/CONTRIBUTOR

Federal agencies seek to dismiss a lawsuit challenging railroad repair work and mining in North Carolina's Nolichucky River Gorge, just across the border from Unicoi County, after Helene.

represented by attorneys from the Southern

Environmental Law Center, while the federal defendants are

represented by the U.S. Justice Department's Environmental and Natural Resources Division.

The case comes after Helene devastated much of Western North Carolina and Northeast Tennessee in late September 2024, when catastrophic flooding destroyed infrastructure and affected waterways throughout the region. The storm's floodwaters, estimated at 30 feet above normal levels, washed away

about 40 miles of CSX's railroad track in the area and bridges along the Nolichucky River, according to federal agencies and local officials.

The legal dispute largely centers on CSX's efforts to rebuild infrastructure since the natural disaster, according to documents. The Army Corps directed CSX to stop surface mining in the Nolichucky River in early December 2024, citing concerns about the company's

riverbed extraction methods during reconstruction.

The agencies' dismissal motion is a jurisdictional challenge to plaintiffs' claims against the Fish and Wildlife Service's emergency consultation process. Agencies argue the court lacks subject matter jurisdiction because the FWS has not taken any "final agency action" subject to judicial review under the Administrative Procedure Act.

"The finality question, however, is a legal question that the Court can and should resolve now because if there is no final agency action, there is no judicial review," federal attorneys wrote in May.

The agencies argue that allowing judicial review would force courts into "day-to-day managerial role over agency operations." The federal motion also seeks dismissal of claims challenging the Army Corps' authorization of CSX's work under multiple nationwide permits.

Agencies also argue that separate Corps districts in Tennessee and North Carolina properly verified that CSX's cross-border repairs qualified for

See **MINING**, Page H58



## HELENE: A YEAR LATER

# How to help: Donations, benefits and more

By **SETH HARRELL**  
sharrell@sixriversmedia.com

One year after the devastation brought forth by Helene, organizations are still stepping up to rebuild our community.

For an updated list of additional efforts, see below:

### GENERAL SUPPORT

The U.S. Economic Development Administration has released The FY 2025 Disaster Supplemental Notice of Funding Opportunity, supporting those throughout the region impacted by natural disasters. Visit [eda.gov/strategic-initiatives/disaster-recovery/supplemental/2025](https://eda.gov/strategic-initiatives/disaster-recovery/supplemental/2025) for more information.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is offering post-natural disaster Grants for local nonprofits and businesses. Information can be found by visiting [grants.gov](https://grants.gov).

The Tennessee Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster offers opportunities to volunteer with remaining clean-up efforts and donations. Visit [tnvoad.org](https://tnvoad.org) for more information.

### VOLUNTEER AND DONATE

Kingsport Chamber general fund donations: [square.link/u/](https://square.link/u/)

QV7hHp7r or call 423-392-8800

American Red Cross: [redcross.org/donate/donation.html](https://redcross.org/donate/donation.html) or call 423-765-4222

Appalachia Service Project: find information at [asphome.org](https://asphome.org)/volunteer/ or donate at [asphome.org/give/](https://asphome.org/give/)  
United Way: [www.volunteer-united.org](https://www.volunteer-united.org) to learn about involvement opportunities and donations

72: The Mission (local faith-based recovery nonprofit): visit [72themission.org](https://72themission.org)/donate for donations and other information

Holston Habitat for Humanity offers volunteer work and donations for new home constructions and repairs. Volunteers may also work inside one of Habitat for Humanity Restores in Kingsport or Johnson City. For more information, visit [holstonhabitat.org](https://holstonhabitat.org) or call 423-378-4760.

### UNICOI COUNTY

Rise Erwin provides assistance to families in Erwin still recovering from Helene. Visit [riseerwin.org/help-erwin-heal-impact](https://riseerwin.org/help-erwin-heal-impact) for more information.

The Upper East Tennessee Human Development Agency offers resources for those in need. Visit [helpingneighbors.com](https://helpingneighbors.com) for more information.

Those who have lost careers due to



CONTRIBUTED/ASP

Appalachia Service Project has completed 11 new home builds and nine major repairs for families affected by Helene as of last month.

Hurricane Helene in Unicoi County may be eligible for the last round of National Dislocated Workers Grants. For more information, visit [dol.gov/agencies/eta/dislocated-workers](https://dol.gov/agencies/eta/dislocated-workers).

Unicoi County is looking for volunteers willing to assist with continued clean-up. All interested can email Suzy Cloyd, executive director of long term recovery, at [director@unicoicountyltrg.org](mailto:director@unicoicountyltrg.org) or call 423-388-2553 for more information.

### GREENE COUNTY

AIDNET of Greene County is accepting donations. Donations

can be sent to AIDNET of Greene County by visiting [aidnetgc.org](https://aidnetgc.org).

### BENEFITS AND HELP

Information for Kingsport residents can be found at [king-sporttn.gov](https://king-sporttn.gov).

Information for Johnson City residents is at [johnsoncitytn.gov](https://johnsoncitytn.gov).

Unemployment benefits and information: [tn.gov/workforce/unemployment.html](https://tn.gov/workforce/unemployment.html).

American Job Center (Kingsport): Call 423-224-1800 or visit [netajc.org](https://netajc.org).

American Job Center (Johnson City): Call 423-610-0222



REBEKAH MCNERNEY/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee brought the community together in this file photo to reflect on Helene's recovery and the fight against hunger.

American Job Center (Erwin): Call 423-735-5773

Cleanup help: For statewide information for individuals and businesses, visit the Tennessee

Department of Environment and Conservation at [tn.gov/environment/program-areas/wr-water-resources/helene-resources.html](https://tn.gov/environment/program-areas/wr-water-resources/helene-resources.html).



# REBUILDING TOGETHER



Community Service



Letters of Love



Food & Blood Drives



Research

ONE YEAR AFTER HURRICANE HELENE, our region's recovery is ongoing—and so is our commitment to long-term renewal.



**EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY** stands with our neighbors, working side-by-side to help our communities heal, rebuild, and thrive *for years to come*.



EAST TENNESSEE STATE  
UNIVERSITY

→  
Learn more at  
[etsu.edu/helene](https://etsu.edu/helene)





# HELENE: A YEAR LATER

## RAFTERS

From Page H48

Moses said the effects seen on USA Raft from the hurricane were two-fold. Because of the amount of destruction Helene claimed on the campgrounds, the organization was in a state of shutdown. Not only did remnants of the river's calamity prevent the business from running, but the United States Forest Service also halted Moses from accessing the Nolichucky until the CSX railroad was finished and new access points could be configured for rafters to use.

The road leading to the campgrounds of USA Raft, Jones Branch Road, was also partially destroyed, only adding to the list of reasons the business isn't open for operation. Being unable to use the river for business due to a lack of access points and destruction to the road, Moses said it was unlikely USA Raft would be back in 2026.

"I would reopen even without rafting permits in 2026," Moses said with a shrug. "That's a crapshoot if anybody's even going to be able to raft. Everyone would like to hope so, but as proven this year, that's determined by the U.S. Forest Service, which seems to be controlled by CSX now."

### WAHOO'S ADVENTURES

Slayton Johnson, owner of Wahoo's Adventures, is also unable to run his busi-



OLIVIA PERRY/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

Patrick Mannion is the operating partner for Osprey Whitewater.

ness due to the restrictions by the forest service. With the sole purpose of Wahoo's business being whitewater rafting in the Nolichucky Gorge, Johnson said the limitations have closed his business until permission for gorge use is granted.

"We were told we cannot operate our one single product that we offer," Johnson said.

Johnson added while there wasn't any damage inflicted on the property his business is located, a major challenge for him was breaking the news to his employees that the business was going to be shut down.

"It was hard to tell my staff," said Johnson. "A lot of these folks had moved here to be specifically with us and for us. To have to have that one really hard conversation, like this has been months of a fight with the forest service and the railroad."

However, despite the shut down, Johnson said some good came out of the flood and helped to keep Wahoo afloat. Not only did he get some amount of

work secured with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, he and two other business owners who were also reliant on the Nolichucky began a nonprofit organization centered on the Nolichucky's cleanup in the early spring of 2025.

"Myself, Trey (Moore) and Patrick (Mannion) started NORA, which is the Nolichucky Outdoor Recreation Association," said Johnson. "NORA was seeking to work towards access on the Nolichucky, like a unified voice, and at some point when we were fully shut down, we pivoted to river cleanups."

### OSPREY WHITEWATER

Mannion, operating partner for Osprey Whitewater, said Osprey was the only one actually still running some business on the Nolichucky. While he, like USA Raft and Wahoo, is prevented from running any trips in the Nolichucky Gorge, he said his business was trying to maintain some normalcy by running on

the lower part of the river unaffected by the railroad construction.

"We have run a handful of lower Nolichucky trips from private access points to private access points," said Mannion. "As of now, we're the only company even operating on the Nolichucky, but we're not really marketing or promoting. We're just trying to hold on to hopefully be able to reopen next season."

Mannion added the outlook for Osprey is something he wants to be optimistic about, but he feels "guarded" about the business being back into the full swing of things by next year due to permitting issues and the railroad construction preventing forward steps.

"We have several big hurdles for our permitting agency, which is the U.S. Forest Service, to kind of reestablish commercial outfitting on the Nolichucky Gorge," said Mannion. "We've got some access issues due to the railroad reconstruction, and certainly we support the rebuilding efforts. I'm pretty guarded."

### BLUE RIDGE PADDLING

Blue Ridge Paddling, much like USA Raft, also saw a significant amount of property damage from the Nolichucky's waters. Mason Schmidt, co-owner, said the hurricane took out their entire boat barn and rafting supplies as well as the land out from under the southern part of the check-in building.

"The physical damage that was sustained here at the business is way above our revenues," said Schmidt. "We're pretty upfront and honest people, and we're out \$2 million. To put everything back to what it was, exactly how we had this place, it would cost about \$2 million. We're making baby steps."

Part of these baby steps were the fixes made to the building that remained. Where the lobby and bar used to be had to be completely stripped to the bare bones of remodeling and dried out to ensure no mold would grow. The southern part of the building had been undermined by the flood and had to be reconstructed, with wooden beams being put up to add back to the original building.

Schmidt said while it has been a process over the last year to get to the physical progress the business was at now, he was awed by the support and aid shown by the community.

"We're so thankful for a lot of the volunteers that we had that showed up right after the event and helped us dry this whole place out and shovel mud for a month straight," Schmidt said, motioning to the large, open area of barren walls and support beams. "That was a pretty powerful moment to see 50 people show up every day, and some folks we didn't even know and

they just wanted to support us."

Much like Moses, Johnson and Mannion, Schmidt said the likelihood of operations for Blue Ridge Paddling to return within the next year was determined by a handful of things out of his control, namely the ability to use the Nolichucky for business.

"We're excited for the railroad to be complete because they are currently using the land we used to be able to launch on," said Schmidt. "The Forest Service hasn't been able to do any repairs to the boat access ramps until the railroad is completed, so it's kinda a domino effect — you've gotta complete one step before you can make the next step happen."

Despite this uncertainty, Schmidt said he has a hopeful view for the future of Blue Ridge Paddling. If the plans to complete the railroad, along with the physical cleanup and repairs to the building, stay on track, he said the business could make a comeback next spring.

"If all the cards line up and the Forest Service authorizes us our permits again and we're able to have access points, we are shooting to be able to raft again by spring of 2026," Schmidt said. "In a perfect world, that's what we would love to do. If we can't go rafting next year, I know a lot of us probably aren't going to make it, so we're really hoping that works out."



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER

## RISE

From Page H12

“Overnight, just like the disaster happened, places that used to serve one purpose have now been completely repurposed to do something else to help,” Farnor said, “And the same thing happens with people. I think the same thing happened to me.”

Farnor said thanks to his day-to-day work with ETSU and volunteerism, he was put in position to direct volunteers who wanted to come into the area and help.

However, with the ongoing chaos and riskiness of the area, those volunteers weren’t able to immediately come in at once and work, since it ultimately could’ve done more harm than good.

Farnor found himself working with local emergency management personnel, United Way representatives and ETSU on organizing volunteer strategies in the immediate days and weeks.

“We were doing what we do every day but now doing it for a different purpose,” he said.

### SHORT-TERM TO LONG-TERM

As time went on, the focus shifted locally for the work to be done. With different national organizations starting to move out of the picture to other disaster areas, the onus turned to the community helping itself finish the recovery.

Enter in the idea of a long-term recovery group. They tend to be more common on the coast and in other areas more commonly affected by natural disasters.

“Local businesses, nonprofits, churches come together and form a new organization or a new group

in their community,” Farnor said. “They take lead in some of that work.

Recruiting volunteers, raising money, helping people rebuild and that sort of thing.”

As the group was being formed for Unicoi County, Farnor was appointed as the founding chair. He oversaw partnerships with groups such as RISE Erwin, United Way of Unicoi County and others.

With that, the rebuild continued. Debris has been cleaned up, Interstate 26 has reopened and new houses are still being constructed.

Still, the work is far from finished. Some businesses remained closed due to damage, like Blue Ridge Paddling. Much of the area around the Nolichucky still is altered due to the waters. And the area won’t feel normal to Farnor until people are back.

“What truly makes a community a community is the people,” he said. “I think when things for me will feel truly normal again is when I can look out my kitchen window and I can see people playing in the field across the street, a family listening to live music, somebody in line at a food truck. People living their lives.”

Volunteers are still welcome to come help, money is still being accepted, and machinery can still be put to use. Because while progress has been made, it’s not quite back to normal yet.

“It won’t be the one-year anniversary when everything is fixed,” Farnor said. “It may not be the two, it may not be the three. It will take time. It may take a decade. That’s just the nature of the work. It’s slow but sure, it’s happening.”

## RIVER

From Page H39

different than wetsuits because they completely prevent water from reaching the wearer.

Bishop said teams clean and wash equipment after taking it out to avoid cross-contamination, filling out exposure reports that can help trace possible health effects later on.

After a few days, the team transitioned to searching on land, where they learned that floodwaters had pushed silt and dirt from the bottom of rivers into the fields.

“It wasn’t just like walking on solid ground. They were walking in knee deep, sometimes hip deep,” Bishop said. “They were actually stepping into things without a lot of protection. One of the takeaways for that was for us to buy muck boots.”

Helene also highlighted other equipment and training priorities the team needs to keep in mind for the future.

“It definitely makes you go back and look at things from a different perspective and say, ‘OK, so what equipment do we need? What additional training do we need?’” Bishop said.

Through a \$353,000 Federal Emergency Management Agency grant, which was awarded before Helene, Bishop said the team trained across multiple disciplines and reallocate other money toward equipment. They focus on training at least three out of six rescue disciplines out a year, and also complete annual swim and confined space tests.

“In the past, we have struggled to be able to maintain those levels [of training],” Bishop said. “Staying current on the training is definitely key for all of our personnel to be able to maintain their skills and knowledge base.”

One of the most important aspects of safety is maintaining a high level of situational awareness, he added.

“Oftentimes the real-world scenarios don’t line up with what you do in the training,” Bishop said. “So you have to be able to take those skills and work through that and be able to make adjustments to fit the scenario.”

### RECREATIONISTS NAVIGATE NEW WATERS

Kevin Colburn, a white-water boater and national stewardship director of nonprofit conservation group American Whitewater, added that there is a lot of overlap between paddlers and recreationists and rescue teams.

“Paddlers kind of have that special power where they can go out and safely traverse rivers,” he said, adding that many paddlers mobilized last year to help both on and off the water. “I was proud of our little community of river people.”

Flooding overran the Nolichucky, French Broad and Pigeon rivers and piled debris throughout towns like Erwin, Greeneville and Newport. In some cases, the rubble was as large as a building, Bishop said.

“It was really man-made debris,” added Colburn. “There’s not much wood that could

stay in a river channel during Helene, like it all got flushed way downstream. But railroad ties and road bridges and chunks of metal and shipping containers, those didn’t move as readily.”

The rivers became mysterious again after a storm, Colburn said.

“Helene was this really bittersweet event where we lost rapids,” Colburn said. “But also there was this opportunity to explore essentially new river beds in places that we knew. And so when you do that, you have to approach it with a great deal of caution.”

For the paddling community and other recreationists, venturing back out again is a self-governing system. Colburn said that better paddlers go in first with good equipment and a strong group, moving slowly and cautiously. They report information about the hazards and new shape of the river, eventually bringing more people into the fold.

“We just get to learn rivers again,” he said.

But while some embraced the new face of the rivers, others are still on land. Colburn said he knows avid paddlers that haven’t hit the rivers almost a year later.

“Part of that is logistics, it’s weirder and harder than it used to be to paddle here ... there’s rivers that are still blocked,” he said. “But I think a bigger part of that is probably just emotional, of going through such a stressful event, I think it makes people less interested in stressful recreation.”

**Jorgelina Manna-Rea contributed to this article.**



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER

## WARNING

From Page H26

recovery process to gain access to gauges through potential grants and mitigation projects,” Sipe said. “We are also looking to, say, ‘go back old school,’ as one of the lessons learned during the catastrophic flooding is that technology, as high and advanced as it may be, can get damaged and taken out.”

Sipe said many gauges were damaged or completely taken out by the high volume and velocity of the water, resulting in conversations on marking of bridges for river heights that can be observed at a distance with binoculars.

“These, of course, are works in process as we are still in recovery mode as of August (2025),” Sipe said.

One structure that did not play a major role in holding back storm waters along the river during Helene is the Nolichucky Dam. Despite its name and presence on the Nolichucky River, the structure is 112 years old, has been out of service as a flood control measure for more than 50 years and does not have a warning system.

“The Nolichucky Dam was built by the Tennessee Eastman Electric Company in 1913 and purchased by (the Tennessee Valley Authority) in 1945,” said Tom Satkowiak, a senior strategic communicator with TVA. “Despite TVA’s efforts to upgrade and maintain power generation with the aging dam and infrastructure, it was

eventually taken out of service in 1972 and the penstocks were plugged with concrete.”

Satkowiak said at the end of the spillway is a service gate “used to pass small flows for short-term drawdown to provide inspection and maintenance of the spillway.”

“However, this service gate is not capable of regulating flood flows,” Satkowiak said. “The main spillway does not have flood gates to control flow over the dam, so flows to the downstream are not controlled by TVA.”

The main function of the dam now is to provide an upstream reservoir used as a waterfowl sanctuary, Satkowiak said. Still, it does not provide relevant flood storage capacity.

“Because TVA does not control releases from the dam, there are no warning systems to alert the public about changes in operations and water flows, Satkowiak said.

While questions remain about improved warning systems and the costs associated with them, Sipe stressed how important it is for people to sign up for the precautionary measures that already are in place in their home counties.

“As far as a more robust system, that would be something that would have to be explored for its effectiveness in our immediate areas of the river,” Sipe said. “Greene County has a SMART911 system, similar to a reverse 9-1-1, in which warnings from the NWS in Morristown are sent out to those who have registered for the services. And as we did

during this disaster event, direct notifications were sent out by key officials and response department heads in regard to evacuation orders and orders for a curfew.

“We can also generate sheltering in place and any other pertinent information as needed. The key to this is for community members to sign up for this service. We cannot stress this enough.”

As for regional warnings, Satkowiak said TVA is using all the tools at its disposal to monitor flooding situations and keep the public informed during storms, such as the TVA Act, the TVA Flood Early Warning System

“TVA’s Flood Early Warning System includes hydrological models and other tools to provide advance warning of when water levels will exceed critical elevations near communities and populated damage centers along the river system,” Satkowiak said. “In addition to using modern flood detection, forecasting and warning tools, we also leverage partnerships with the National Weather Service and state and local emergency management agencies to inform the public and our partners about flood risk.”

Satkowiak said the TVA River Forecast Center is staffed 24 hours per day, seven days per week and 365 days per year, with full backup operational capability. Engineers monitor weather conditions and are trained to take preemptive actions and make notifications when flood conditions are present or expected.

Additionally, the River Forecast Center has real-

time weather radars, gauge data using satellite systems and real-time reservoir monitoring tools.

Satkowiak said that when river system flooding is expected, TVA partners with the other agencies and communities that are responsible for providing additional warning instructions to the public. The National Weather Service maintains primary responsibility for issuing flood warnings. These can come in the form of flood watches, flood warnings and flash flood emergency warnings, which are broadcast through media outlets, weather radios and the Emergency Alert System.

During flash flood emergencies, evacuation decisions are made at the community and local levels. Information from TVA helps communities prepare for potential evacuation or other flood readiness activities.

Satkowiak said TVA learns from each storm to improve its systems before the next dangerous weather event occurs and conducts routine inspections, maintenance and repairs of its dams.

“To continuously improve our operations, the TVA team has adopted lessons learned from recent events,” Satkowiak said. “Additional real-time situational awareness tools have been added to the RFC suite of monitoring systems, and we have done additional hardening of communication processes and equipment in order to maintain alternate communication networks during extreme emergencies.”

## MINING

From Page H53

permits. They contend that one permit “also authorizes the repair, rehabilitation, or replacement of those structures or fills destroyed or damaged by storms, floods, fire or other discrete events.”

The Nolichucky River Gorge has long been considered a white-water rafting destination for outdoor enthusiasts across the world, but Helene’s floodwaters “forever changed many of the well-known whitewater features and damaged the rail line running along the river,” according to American Rivers.

Patrick Hunter, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, told Six Rivers Media in August that plaintiffs hope the court will deny the agencies’ recent moves to dismiss the case. He said “litigation is now waiting on the court to act.”

“Since we [began] the case, CSX has stopped digging up the river to rebuild their railroad, so that’s a great on-the-ground outcome [so far] that the activity has stopped,” he said.

“My hope is that the court will deny the motions to dismiss,” he added. “Then, that will allow us to fully brief the merits of the issue before the court.”

Hunter said the center took the case to help protect the gorge against environmental degradation and projects that could harm outdoor recreation that attracts people to the Nolichucky.

“The Nolichucky River is just such an exceptional place, and I think the harm that CSX was inflicting on the river and the people that use the river was just completely unjustified and should never have been permitted,” he said.

“When we saw what was happening, we thought we’ve got to step up here and speak up for this, this resource and the people that rely on it.”



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER

## DEBRIS

From Page H25

Greene County had the most to be collected with 1.6 million cubic yards, followed by Cocke County with 1.4 million, Washington County 1.1 million, Carter County 406,400, Unicoi County 376,700 and Johnson 287,300, Coulter said.

Hamblen, where Morristown is located, accounted for the remainder of the 5.2 million cubic yards handled in the waterway debris removal project TEMA awarded to Phillips.

### HOW MUCH DID THIS COST?

Coulter said that the vast majority of the cost of the debris collections will be paid by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

She said the detailed agreement between FEMA and TEMA provides for FEMA reimbursement over a specified time, with what she called a small amount being paid by the state. However, as of press time she said she did not supply an overall amount, although she said it was sizable, and earlier said the amount to be paid by TEMA was still being determined.

### PHILLIPS TALKS DEBRIS COLLECTIONS

“Our team led efforts to collect and dispose of both vegetative and man-made debris safely, restoring water flow and mitigating flood risk across East Tennessee’s rivers and lakes,” said Emily Torgerson, senior vice president of communications for Phillips.

“Phillips has decades of experience responding to major storm events nationwide,” Torgerson said. “Each recovery effort brings its own set of challenges.”

She said Phillips in the past supported disaster recovery for hurricanes, including Katrina, Harvey, Irma, Ian, Michael and others. Its work spans debris removal, emergency access and infrastructure protection across both coastal and inland environments.

“Helene was especially complex due to the large amount of debris distributed across sensitive river systems and reservoirs, which required extensive overwater access, environmental coordination and the creation of temporary debris management sites,” Torgerson said.

### WHAT WAS REMOVED, WHAT WAS NOT

To be removed, the TEMA officials said items just couldn’t be in or near the waterways.

“Waterway debris removal had to have been in the waterways that were identified early on and then it had to be Helene related,” Coulter said.

“There wasn’t necessarily like a line, but if that debris on their property was still there, they needed to get it to the right-of-way and/or handle it,” she said. “It wasn’t an easy project, which took months to compete in difficult terrain and through all kinds of weather.”

Coulter also cautioned that some signs of the damage caused by Helene will remain for the foreseeable future despite all efforts to clean up and move on.

### TYPES OF DEBRIS

Everything from vegetation to vehicles and trailers were among removed debris.

“Vegetative debris was probably the most debris that was collected,” Coulter stated. “But we were also getting trailers, vehicles, vessels, household hazardous waste, construction and demolition

debris, white goods (large household appliances, traditionally those with a white exterior), e-waste (electronic waste), tires and then decaying debris were also on that list to remove from our waterways.”

Once debris were collected, something had to be done. Some will be used again, while other debris were simply thrown away.

“The debris that was vegetative was mulched and used through a recycling program. The mulch that was created was able to be put back into the areas to help with erosion and to help with stabilization,” Coulter said. “Some of it was sent to the landfill and most of it outside of the vegetative debris was actually sent to the landfill.”

Although Coulter said the waterway debris collection project has ended, she added that doesn’t mean there couldn’t still be debris in local waterways.

Coulter added that a sonar study recently concluded on the Watauga River found no debris that posed any kind of risks to boaters or anyone of that nature in that lake specifically.

“There is still going to be debris in the waterways. We removed the waterway that was determined to pose risk to health and safety. That could be because of the proximity to critical infrastructure like dams, but we removed what was determined to pose the greatest risk,” Coulter said. “I think it is important to note that it doesn’t matter how much effort that goes into something like this, the unfortunate circumstances of disasters is usually you are never going to get to what it was or how it was prior to, but our goal is surely to get it as close to as pre-Helene as possible.”

Coulter said the project scope varied across the

region but added that Helene “certainly presented” challenges.

“This one was big, it impacted a very large region and there were multiple counties involved and there was a lot of destruction just because of the type of event that it was,” Coulter said.

“What I will say: each disaster poses its own set of unique challenges and while this was the scale that it was,” she said. “Back in April we had flooding and severe weather and tornadoes that impacted McNairy and Tipton and Obion and Montgomery counties in West and Middle Tennessee. Because of how our geography is different kinds of disasters are going to wreak havoc in different ways.”

### MOVING FORWARD

Although Coulter and the Phillips spokeswoman said that Phillips and its subcontractors have finished the debris removal project, Coulter said TEMA will remain in contact with local communities.

“People are still reaching out saying why this debris was collected, but this debris wasn’t. Ultimately it boils down to that risk. We encourage people to contact our counties if they feel as though the debris that is on their property or if they have noticed something to reach out to the county,” Coulter said.

“We are still very integrated within these communities, we still have weekly calls with the county mayors to make sure their needs are being met and to hear what is going on to see if there is anything we can continue to do in supporting them through this,” she said. “We are almost a year out from the anniversary and recovery is still very much ongoing and it will still be ongoing for several years to come.”

## WATAUGA

From Page H25

She realized one way to get the word out would be to hold a fishing tournament, where people could see the beauty of Watauga Lake.

Woodby went to the Tennessee Department of Tourism for help. She said the first anniversary of Helene was approaching and how good if there were stories about the recovery along with the inevitable stories of the destruction.

She said the state tourism department responded quickly.

Unlike the debris removed from the land, which was directed by the counties, the removal of debris from waterways was directed at state level. The Knoxville-based engineering firm of Phillips & Jordan was the lead contractor.

The operation, led by a coordinated effort of federal, state and local agencies, took several months of work to restore safe access to waterways and mitigate environmental impacts. While the scope of debris removal has been extensive, not all debris poses a risk to public health or safety, and some debris will remain in the waterways, state officials said.

“Each disaster is unique in its own way, and Helene was no exception,” said TEMA Assistant Director of Recovery and Mitigation Craig Hanrahan.

One of the final phases of waterway debris removal was at Watauga Lake, where crews conducted an underwater sonar survey to identify any submerged debris not visible from the surface.



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER

## ROADS

From Page H21

In Unicoi County, 25 homes were destroyed with around 75 damaged, making a total of 100 properties, according to Finch. For commercial properties, 11 businesses were destroyed, with 14 having major damage and six with minor damage, totaling 31 businesses. There were also six manufacturers affected, as well as the Unicoi County Hospital.

### WASHINGTON COUNTY

Washington County Mayor Joe Grandy said work began in August to rebuild Bill Mauk Road.

Bill Mauk Road is among projects costing nearly \$60 million to rebuild roads and bridges and for relocating county services destroyed by the Sept. 27 flooding on the Nolichucky River. That includes spending nearly \$6 million to build a now-completed road to the Little Germany community.

An additional \$20 million will go to pay for “river mitigation” and stabilization projects to address issues created by the record flooding on the Nolichucky River. Grandy said the idea is to use large rock to stabilize sections of the river, particularly in areas where the county is rebuilding infrastructure.

“We are beginning to pick up speed in getting these projects out to bid and to begin construction,” Grandy said. “We want to get as much



CONTRIBUTED

**A look at the road near the Jonesborough KOA following Helene.**

work done as possible before winter.”

Grandy said the design work to rebuild a section of A.J. Willis Road “completely lost to river flooding” is now finished. He expects the project will go out for bid sometime in the fall.

Washington County has completed a bond sale raising \$72.7 million in funds to assist in paying for the flood recovery and remediation projects. The plan is to issue the infrastructure debt for a 10-year term, with the notes being retired once the county is reimbursed for its storm damages by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Of those funds, \$12.5 million is being allocated to rebuild damaged county roads, \$27 million to build a new Corby Bridge and at least \$1.5 million to relocate a storm-damaged solid waste convenience

center in Lamar.

“Realistically, most of these projects are going to be reimbursed by FEMA at 75% of the cost,” the mayor said.

Grandy said that means following strict rules for receiving the federal reimbursements. He also noted that as of August, FEMA has awarded more than \$35 million in individual assistance to the region.

### JOHNSON COUNTY

Johnson County has planned a three-phase creek stabilization project, which will repair 74 sites impacted by Helene.

“It’s basically just cleaning up what’s there and unstable right now — there might be excavation at some sites — and replacing it with rock or perhaps something more stable,” said Troy Arnold, Johnson County purchasing agent.

The federal government, though the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Hurricane Helene Emergency Creek Stabilization Program, is giving Johnson County funds upfront for the project.

During the first phase, which Arnold said is the largest, 29 sites will be repaired. During its Aug. 21 meeting, the Johnson County Board of Commissioners awarded a \$1,671,931.50 bid to Baker’s Construction Services for this first phase.

In August, Johnson County began paving roads damaged by Hurricane Helene and debris trucks that constantly used them for months afterward. The county is drawing from a \$15 million loan it took out earlier this year to pay for the paving in three equal installments.

The Johnson County Board of Commissioners approved \$2.38 million for chip-and-seal repairs on 22 roads in June.

The commissioners also approved \$4.612 million for 18 asphalt-based projects on 12 separate roads in May.

### CARTER COUNTY

When Helene roared through, it left one thing excessively damaged: roads. Extensive damage to local roads came in the mountainous eastern and southern sections of Carter County.

The Carter County Highway Department surveyed 152 sites for damage to the roads and made a list of 63 county roads with damage from the storm. The damage

extended over 55 miles of county roadway.

The survey determined that a \$40 million bond issue would be needed to begin repairs on the damaged roads. While the bond issue did come through, work could not begin immediately because the storm had destabilized the banks on which many of the roads had been built.

The county had 50 bank stabilization sites designated across the county. Most of these were divided into three groups. One was in the Shell Creek area of Roan Mountain. Another was the Heaton Branch section. The third was in the Roan Mountain area that included Bear Branch, Bluegrass, Hampton Creek, Crabtree and Old Railroad Grade Road.

The bank stabilizations were done primarily through the Natural Resources Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That work was funded 100% by the federal government.

As bank stabilization projects are completed, permanent repairs to county roads are still underway.

### SCOTT COUNTY

“Debris removal was our primary expense, and much of that was incurred by our emergency service agencies,” said Scott County Emergency Coordinator Jeff Brickey. “It was a disaster across the region but, compared to everywhere else, it was just a disturbance in Scott.”

Most Helene damage was caused by fallen and

damaged timber and brush, with little reported flooding, Brickey said. Based on costs for labor, equipment and materials, the county has submitted \$50,200.83 for reimbursement through FEMA and state emergency funding, he added.

“We had no shelter expenses for the post-Helene period,” Brickey said.

Virginia Department of Transportation crews and contractors cleared 2,700 cubic yards of debris from Scott County roads the week after Helene, said VDOT spokesperson Michelle Earl, and 31,866 cubic yards of debris cut and pushed off roadways in following days.

According to Appalachian Power reports in the days after Helene, 11,200 of its 11,996 Scott County customers were without power. That dropped to 45 customers within three days as around 1,000-line workers from APCO and surrounding utilities tackled downed lines from winds and treefalls.

Gate City is in the final permitting process to install an emergency generator for its water and sewer plants after post-Helene power losses led to boil warning notices for town residents in the week after Helene struck.

Brickey and Assistant County Administrator Bill Dings both said the county is awaiting details on how FEMA and Virginia agencies will handle claims of water entry into five structures and homes during Helene.



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER

## TRESTLE

From Page H17

the swoosh of mops, and the rumble of tractors laboring in harmony. Humans, working in perfect, determined unison, immediately began the enormous task of reclaiming their town.

Early the next morning, I felt the delicate paws of a young cadaver dog moving beneath my pilings, its keen nose searching the rubble. A wave of profound relief washed over me when it found no bodies, no lives lost — a small miracle in the face of such devastation.

A second surge came pouring into



CHRIS BELL

**After hours of effort from contractors, town staff and volunteers, Trestle 17 was reopened.**

Damascus, but it was a quieter, more powerful tide, a river of human kindness. It flowed not with mud and debris, but with donated water and money,

nourishing food, and essential supplies. Countless volunteers and agencies extending their hands and hearts, a rising force of compassion

that began the long, hard work of rebuilding. Unlike the flash flood, this surge lasted weeks, then months.

I wept as I saw the

power of people uniting in a stream of selflessness and common goal of assisting each other. I lay witness to the generous labor of clubs and young Scouts underfoot, removing debris by hand and seeding the soil back to life. Just beyond my eastern abutment, I watched the hands of young Mennonites laying new foundations and raising the frames of brand-new homes. Local and state leaders, forest rangers, and even congressional members standing upon my fragile deck, working in concert, vowing to revive my family upstream and restore the beloved Creeper Trail.

After tireless hours of dedicated effort from contractors, town staff and volunteers, I was reopened. Once again, providing a safe and critical connection for both residents and tourists to walk and bike this precious section of trail.

I am Trestle 17, more than just wood and steel. I am a vibrant link to Damascus' cherished past and a hopeful passage toward a thriving future. I now stand as a powerful symbol of this community's remarkable resilience, a testament to their inherent strength and unwavering resolve, paving a path toward a brighter horizon brimming with unlimited possibilities.

## BAKER

From Page H19

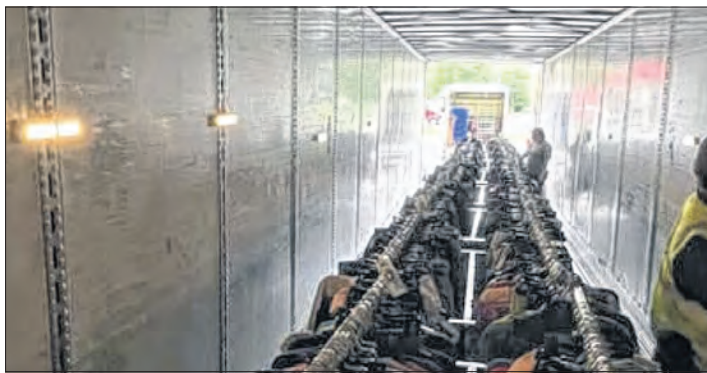
parking lots, twice, for major donation drives that generated overwhelming community response. And volunteers from churches, service organization and others came out to help their neighbor in need.

But for me, the real heroes of this story? Our employees.

They asked to be involved. They collected donations. They sorted donations. They loaded trucks, comforted families, and met every challenge with humility and grace. I have never been prouder of our team.

Disaster relief wasn't in their job description. But compassion was in their character.

This year has taught us a great deal, not just about logistics and coordination, but about who we are as an



CONTRIBUTED

**Donations of clothing, shoes, coats, blankets and other items poured in from a community anxious to help.**

organization. We now know that Goodwill can play a powerful role in disaster response, not as a sideline partner, but as a frontline resource. We have the infrastructure, the community trust, and the mission-minded people to make a real difference when crisis strikes.

And when the next storm comes, and we know it will,

we'll be ready. Because we've built more than a model. We've built a mindset.

We've also learned something about our region. Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia are made up of people who show up. People who don't ask, "Is this my problem?" but instead ask, "What can I do?" We've seen local businesses open their doors, church members

form volunteer brigades, and neighbors bring in bags of clothes with tears in their eyes and kindness in their hearts.

To all of you: Thank you.

To the donors who gave what they could: Thank you!

To the volunteers who worked until the job was done: Thank you!

To the local partners who said yes without hesitation: Thank you!

And to our dedicated staff, who reminded me what servant leadership looks like, you are the heartbeat of Goodwill. Thank you!

Our mission has always been about more than just resale. It's about renewal, renewal of purpose, dignity, and the community we serve. Every item donated, every dollar spent in our stores helps fund job training and employment programs that transform lives. Now, we've seen how that same spirit can

transform disaster into opportunity, not in a transactional sense, but in a human one.

Goodwill is more than a store. We are a response team and a partner in recovery.

We are a mirror of the community we serve.

And if this past year has shown us anything, it's that our community is resilient, generous and united in the face of hardship.

We don't know when the next crisis will come. But when it does, I know this: Goodwill will not face it alone.

Because this region doesn't wait for someone else to step up.

We are the people who do.

If I've not said it, I have the best job in the world and work in the best region in the world. Together we are resilient!

**Morris Baker is president and CEO of Goodwill of Tennesseva Area Inc.**



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER

## BMS

From Page H16

“We had it full of water in like six hours.”

With the South Building overflowing, they had to move about \$5 million worth of water underneath Gate 7 at the speedway. Gate 6 was filled with toilet paper and other paper items. They estimated they turned the South Building over six to eight times with \$40-60 million worth of supplies.

### CLOSE TO HOME

Months later, the Delps still get emotional telling the stories. The house Amanda owns, which formerly belonged to her grandmother on River Road, was spared, although water got right to the front steps. Her aunt's house right beside it also survived.

The day of the storm, Amanda and her staff were preparing for the Apple Festival, which was supposed to start in a few days. Brian came by and asked her and a co-worker to drive out to look at the south end of the county. They parked on the Jackson Love Highway bridge to survey the damage.

Just 17 minutes after making a video, the bridge washed out right where they'd been. For Amanda, a 1994 graduate of Unicoi County High School, this is the com-

munity she has always called home.

Brian is originally from Indiana, but he's lived most of his life in Northeast Tennessee. While it's been a blessing to be an educator and coach to so many, he says nothing compares to the work with the relief center.

“Of everything I've ever done in my life, this was the greatest to be able to help so many people during the worst moment of their lives,” he said. “We had people that came into that center that had lost everything. To be able to give them that immediate hope, and say, ‘Here are the items that you're going to need to get you through one more day,’ to see their faces, to talk to them, and to see God's hand in everything, I can't even talk about it without tearing up.”

It wasn't just for Carter and Unicoi counties. People in Washington, Greene, Hawkins and other parts of Northeast Tennessee got needed assistance. Folks in the Carolinas, Virginia and Kentucky also received help.

“A lot of the things that Unicoi County got, they took to Western North Carolina because they got damage even worse than we did,” Brian said. “We were all the way down to Swannanoa, North Carolina and up in Damascus, Virginia. By the grace of God, we had just enough water left. Saltville,

Virginia, their water system went out, and they called. We had just enough to help them while their crisis were going on.”

Early on, people from Pikeville, Kentucky sent relief supplies they had left over from a flood a few years ago. Just weeks before the Food City 500 NASCAR race, there was a need to move the surplus water that local counties no longer needed. Pikeville got hit by another flood around that time and desperately needed water. The folks at the relief center were able to send water back to Pikeville to help them through that crisis.

Brian told another story of a lady from Cocke County coming by after her family lost electricity. There was only one generator at the center, and before he could even write the paperwork to give it to her, another truckload of generators came in.

He was joking with Stan now they had all these generators, but there's no fuel. No sooner did the words come out of his mouth when a car pulled up with gift cards so people could buy fuel.

“It's amazing to see God's work and just how people help,” he said. “Tennessee's the Volunteer State, but nobody really sees it until something actually happens. We even had people from Utah who brought computers for Chromebooks for Carter County. Our

volunteers, we had some of the best volunteers that stayed day-in, day-out, and they kept it going.”

### ALL INVOLVED

The relief center was open 14 hours a day, seven days a week through October. That doesn't include the work needed to get it ready for the next day. The Delps worked closely with organizations like Samaritan's Purse.

Presidents and CEOs of local companies showed up at BMS in their work clothes. One was Steve Smith with Food City's close involvement with BMS. Brian called the amount of goods and supplies the grocery store chain brought in “amazing.”

Amanda added that other donations came from every state within the continental U.S. Volunteers traveled from as far away as Florida, New York and Northern Ohio to help. Brian's sister made the trip from Indiana.

“Some of them drove eight, 10-12, hours to help us,” Amanda said. “We had one couple that just got in the car and started driving and didn't even know where they were there. People had that heart that they just wanted to come help.”

There are still rebuilding efforts going on. Appalachian Service Project, Second Harvest Food Bank, United Way, church organizations and others continue to

help those in need.

The Delps are home now. Amanda is back at the chamber, while Brian is retired from teaching. He often gets together with Stan to fish and golf. There were a lot of long hours and hard work during their time at the center. While they were glad to come home, there were mixed emotions.

“It was hard closing that door for the last time,” Amanda said. “It was a good accomplishment for the community and our area as a whole. Everybody thinks of Bristol Motor Speedway as this big entertainment center, but it's been opened up to help people during times of need. Speedway Children's Charities continues to help communities all over the region.”

### SPECIAL TOUCHES

Amanda talked about the people who added handwritten notes to go with their donations. She could feel the love that went into them, and they had a wall covered with cards and letters from people all over the country. Brian was touched by the handmade quilts made by ladies who had gathered in the basements of their churches. It included several quilts from a group in Sandusky, Ohio.

Keeping organized was difficult at times from a logistical standpoint, not knowing how much food and medical supplies they would receive. They

set up a system that seemed logical at first, in which food would go on one side, water on one side, there would be a space for cleaning supplies, etc.

“All of a sudden, you would just get this huge shipment that you can't get all of it in here, so then you have to put little bit over here,” Brian said. “We'd start spilling over into another bay of the warehouse and another. We had everything you can think of. We had fire departments from all over the country contribute. We had a huge donation of fire gear come in from Pennsylvania because a lot of our volunteer fire departments were affected.”

They worked with the state fire marshal's office to notify fire departments in Northeast Tennessee to come and look at the donated equipment.

The state fire marshal also sent carbon monoxide detection monitors for the safety of the people who were staying in small tents.

“I guess the theme that went all through the entire center was the minute we would identify something we needed, it just appeared,” Brian said. “Someone would call and say, we lost this, or we lost that, or we need this, or we need that. Within minutes, it seemed like it would be there. You could see God's hand in it. It's true that God works in mysterious ways.”



# HELENE: A YEAR LATER

## GOODWILL

From Page H11

DeLozier said this helped give people dignity and respect so they could walk into a situation, making it easier to find what they needed and in such a way “that they didn’t feel like they were digging through a pile of trash to get it.”

It began with the donation drives, and continued with 61 stops through Aug. 6 of this year, including 42 in Tennessee and 19 in Virginia, helping at least 4,200 people in the process.

“That is ones we have recorded. My guess is it is more than that,” DeLozier said. “We literally tried to track every person and items categorically that we have helped. It has been a big effort.”

None of the items that were donated to those in need came from the regular Goodwill stores, and there were so many donations from all across the country that many of those items are still available.

“That was our approach to say we are going to collect for the disaster and give out to the disaster and not mix it with our daily business,” DeLozier said. “Ninety-five percent of what we have done is what we do in the store every day with clothes.”

DeLozier said they weren’t taking water, food or those things out, instead connecting people to those resources when they asked.

Goodwill Industries Acquisition Director Janie Jarvis reached out to the various locations across the region to determine where the greatest needs were, keeping a spreadsheet of all the different stops to pro-



BRIAN WOODSON/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Goodwill Industries Vice-President of People Operations Matt DeLozier.**

*‘For everybody here, it was new as an organization to do something like that. We knew we needed to do something and what we could do was take the confusion of donating clothes and make it make sense to people.’*

Matt DeLozier, Goodwill Industries

vide an itinerary for each day.

Delivery days were Tuesday and Thursday. White, who has worked in construction for more than 25 years, saw an ad for help from Goodwill Industries and decided to do his part to help under sometimes extreme conditions.

“It was difficult sometimes, a lot of two-lane roads, a lot of roads that were being under repair. It was a struggle, but we made it where we needed to go,” White said. “One time we were going to Grundy and we had a very difficult time, but we made it around. We always made a way. That was a difficult day. That was the worse.”

There were plenty of long days for all involved, not

only for White, but the many associates who assisted with the efforts, either with the truck or back in Kingsport getting ready for the next delivery day.

“I would try to be here by 6 o’clock to get up there in time and it was 5 or 6 that evening before we could get back. We were going around 12 hours a day,” White said. “When we were doing it twice a week we would go out and do it, come back the next day, unload, restock and then on Thursday go again.”

Sherry Meade, the district manager for Goodwill stores in Virginia, went along for many of those trips. They included stops on the side of the road, church parking lots or anywhere they could



BRIAN WOODSON/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Goodwill Industries Communications Director Amanda Adams.**

safely park and distribute clothing items. Those clothes had been sized, separated by categories and put on racks, something Meade compared to shopping in a store.

“We didn’t asked for names or anything. We just said, ‘How many people in your household are you shopping for, men, women and kids,’” Meade said. “They went in there and shopped for their kids or whoever was in their household they needed to get for.”

Meade said people would get a pair of shoes, a blanket and four articles of clothing for whoever needed it, as an example. They also gave away sleeping bags, tents and whatever was donated for disaster relief. Mostly, it was clothing and blankets.

Goodwill Industries rented the former Ashley Furniture location in Kingsport to store donations. Associates sorted the clothes while preparing a new collection of items for the next delivery day.

“Basically, they restock it so when he came to pick it up it was a new set of clothes,” DeLozier said. “It was kind of new and refreshed so every time

somebody went in we had a crew of people back here doing that too. Those people sorted that all week.”

The associates worked Mondays and Wednesdays to make sure that deliveries could be made Tuesday and Thursday.

This went on throughout the fall and winter and into summer before the focused relief efforts were ended in August. Amanda Adams, communications director, said the company would be ready if needed again.

Meade was certainly proud to have been part of the relief efforts.

“I know we helped a lot of people and reached out to a lot people, but this was extreme,” Meade said. “You see some days with hundreds of people coming in and you knew they needed it and they appreciated it.

Meade said it was a wonderful feeling helping out, recalling people stopping by the truck to show their appreciation even if they didn’t need it.

“Helping people, it helps you. It is a blessing to you as much as it is to them to be able to do that for each other.”



# In loving memory of Boone McCrary, RN



## Compassionate caregiver, devoted colleague, and cherished friend

Boone McCrary, RN, was a 32-year-old nurse at Greeneville Community Hospital who lost his life while trying to rescue someone during the flooding from Hurricane Helene. It was reported he was in a boat with his dog attempting to save the life of a civilian from the rapid floodwaters. Both Boone and his beloved dog, Moss, were later found by search and rescue personnel. Boone's selfless actions reflect the very best of who we are.

His team members at Greeneville Community Hospital remember Boone as the ultimate caregiver who was kind and compassionate, with a larger-than-life personality. He loved music and was known to sing to team members and patients to lighten the mood.

In his memory, Ballad Health has established the Boone McCrary, RN Memorial Nursing Scholarship Fund to support future caregivers who, like Boone, are working other jobs and will make the brave decision to answer the call to nursing.

Boone's story reminds people that excellence can come from anywhere and that one person's courage can leave a lasting impact.