



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

"Governor Hochul has shamefully forgotten us in a time of need"

THOMAS F. O'MARA October 17, 2022

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Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week is a joint column by Senator O'Mara, Assemblyman Phil Palmesano, Assemblyman Joe Giglio, and Assemblywoman Marjorie Byrnes, "Governor Hochul has shamefully forgotten us in a time of need"

As this region's representatives in the State Legislature, we have a responsibility to stand up when New York government falls down on its responsibility to the citizens and communities we serve.

If state government fails to respond to even one of our communities, our deepest concern is that New York's powers-that-be will become emboldened to ignore other small, rural Upstate, Southern Tier and Finger Lakes communities in the future.

Background: It has been over a year since Tropical Storm Fred struck Steuben County on August 17-18, 2021. The storm caused devastating flash flooding that resulted in an estimated \$35 million in damages to infrastructure, businesses, and homes.

In the storm's aftermath, we called on New York Governor Kathy Hochul to immediately provide direct state grants to assist Steuben County's flooding victims, residents, and

businesses recover as quickly as possible, especially before winter set in.

She has not delivered.

In fact, fifteen months later, Governor Hochul has still failed to deliver the state financial assistance that's needed to help Steuben County residents and business owners make a full recovery.

It's wrong and we recently joined local leaders and flooding victims in Woodhull, one of the hardest-hit communities, to say so once again.

Let's be clear on what has transpired since Tropical Storm Fred in August 2021.

Federal and state emergency aid has been delivered to help repair public infrastructure, including for the rebuilding of the Jasper-Troupsburg High School.

The state has picked up the ten-percent non-federal share of disaster-related costs for localities.

The federal Small Business Administration (SBA) has offered low-interest loans to businesses and homeowners.

There has been overwhelming assistance and support from neighboring communities and not-for-profit organizations, including the United Way of the Southern Tier and Corning Incorporated.

Nevertheless, in September 2021, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) denied the state's request for Individual Assistance in the form of direct grants to victims.

Earlier this year, FEMA rejected the state's appeal of that initial denial.

In February, the Hochul administration finally got around to offering \$1 million in emergency repair grants to eligible homeowners whose primary residences were damaged by the storm.

However, here's the key point: The state has failed to ensure that this emergency aid could be used to *reimburse homeowners and small businesses who already took out loans or paid for repairs out*

of their own pockets late last year to replace boilers and furnaces and make other repairs before the start of winter.

In addition to not being reimbursable, the grant program was offered, in typical New York State fashion, with little or no guidance, as well as restrictions and limitations that have hindered instead of helped people apply. So much so, in fact, that it's our understanding that only three homeowners have benefitted from any grants – despite the fact that well over 100 homes and businesses were devastated.

Homeowners and business owners alike could not wait on the state to make repairs before the onset of winter.

Yet Governor Hochul continues to leave them out in the cold.

For over a year, we have done everything possible to work directly with the Hochul administration to secure and provide the direct state grants that would help Steuben County communities, businesses, and individual homeowners fully recover from last August's devastating flash floods – including reimbursement for residents and business owners.

At a time when New York State government is distributing hundreds of millions of dollars of aid for everything under the sun, including no-strings-attached assistance for other hard-hit flood victims in other parts of the state, Governor Hochul's refusal to help Steuben County becomes increasingly shameless with every passing day.

It's wrong.

We have repeatedly asked the following question: How can Governor Hochul justify, allow and say that it is acceptable to take the tax dollars of Steuben County citizens to help provide assistance to illegal immigrants in New York City impacted by Hurricane Ida flooding, but it is absolutely unacceptable for Steuben County tax dollars to stay here, in our local communities, to help our neighbors who were devastated by Tropical Storm Fred?

Families, businesses, and communities throughout Steuben County were devastated. Many are still struggling to recover. It's unconscionable that Governor Hochul would simply decide to say, "Tough luck."

Instead, she needs to finally declare that “help is on the way” and provide the direct assistance that’s needed -- and warranted.

We continue to hear from homeowners still struggling to make ends meet after trying to rebuild and recover from Tropical Storm Fred. Business owners are still trying to get back on their feet and survive throughout what was already a tough economic climate.

Governor Hochul has ignored ongoing needs in Steuben County, plain and simple. Despite our repeated requests for help, and despite reassurances from the Hochul administration that February’s emergency grant program would be amended to *include reimbursable costs for homeowners*, Governor Hochul has been silent.

New York State has more than enough funding to effectively address local needs, if it was a priority for her. It has been done in the not-too-distant past for other flooding victims, including in Yates County, the Mohawk Valley, Lake Ontario, and Sullivan County, where residents and businesses received direct state grants to help cover the costs of repairing and rebuilding in similar circumstances where the federal government did not deliver.

Fast forward to September 2021, just weeks after Tropical Storm Fred hit Steuben County, Hurricane Ida brought record-breaking rain and flash flooding to New York City. Within days, Governor Hochul was announcing \$27 million in emergency state grant funding to come to the aid of the city's undocumented immigrants who were unable to receive federal Individual Assistance. She followed that up with another \$25 million in this year's budget, for a total of \$52 million for illegal immigrants who sustained damage.

Yet over the past fifteen months we have patiently worked with the Hochul administration to secure similar state grants for the residents we represent in Steuben County.

Our frustration is straightforward: If it is the right thing to do for illegal immigrants in New York City, why isn't it the right thing to do for citizens and communities in rural Steuben County?

The point is worth repeating: Governor Hochul has provided a total of \$52 million in direct state emergency flooding grants for New York City's illegal immigrants while citizens and communities in rural Steuben County remain ignored.

Most recently, Governor Hochul quickly delivered state assistance to hurricane victims in Puerto Rico and Florida.

Why has Governor Hochul turned her back on Steuben County?

Equally troubling, if Steuben County is ignored now, what does the future hold when the next flash flooding disaster wipes out homes and businesses anywhere else across the region?

The state clearly has the resources to respond. There is \$32 million in the state's current Aid to Localities budget for storm recovery and \$21 million in Contingency Reserve that could be used to assist the residents affected by Tropical Storm Fred.

Only a small portion of those millions needs to be dedicated to reimbursing Steuben County residents and business owners.

Town of Woodhull Supervisor Scott Grant says, "The Town of Woodhull residents and businesses are very resilient. For the past 13 months, despite no Federal or State funding to assist them, they have come together and have done whatever they can do to rebuild and maintain their homes and businesses within our wonderful town. Unfortunately, some residents may have left, while others are still overwhelmed with the costs to rebuild with today's economic uncertainties. Thank goodness for the local contributions from neighboring communities and businesses that have helped our residents over the past year to get their houses

operational and livable. The financial and emotional strain is felt throughout the town, the lack of simple services like gasoline, groceries, food, and postal services may only complicate Issues, but town will bounce back eventually, and those vacant and empty parcels damaged from the flood will get repaired, replaced or torn down. Although FEMA will eventually refund some of the money to make repairs to our roads and public buildings, the real need is for the families and businesses that have nowhere else to go. This is where we need some help from our State Government to give our residents some hope. It is really hard to locally support some state initiatives when it appears that the State has forgotten us in our time of need.”

That’s the word from the front lines of Tropical Storm Fred, fifteen months later, in Steuben County: Governor Hochul has shamefully turned her back and “forgotten us in our time of need.”

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