



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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## Regional lawmakers charge Governor Hochul has 'turned her back' on Steuben County flood victims: Urge state to finally provide direct, no-strings-attached flood relief

THOMAS F. O'MARA September 29, 2022

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Woodhull, N.Y., September 29—It's been **over a year since Tropical Storm Fred struck Steuben County last August**, causing devastating **flash flooding in many area communities**, and today

State Senator Tom O'Mara (R,C,I-Big Flats), Assemblyman Phil Palmesano (R,C,I-Corning), Assemblywoman Marjorie Byrnes (R,C-Caledonia), and Assemblyman Joe Giglio (R,C-Olean) criticized New York Governor Kathy Hochul for failing to provide the **state financial assistance that's still needed to help many residents and business owners make a full recovery.**

At a news conference at the Woodhull Youth Center on Thursday, O'Mara and Palmesano were joined by Steuben County Director of Public Safety Tim Marshall, Woodhull Town Supervisor Scott Grant, Rick Andrews, owner of H.P. Smith & Son, Inc. Funeral Home in Woodhull, and Stacey Foster, a Woodhull homeowner.

**In a joint statement, O'Mara, Palmesano, Byrnes, and Giglio said,** "We have done everything possible over the past year to work with Governor Hochul and her 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. Unfortunately, the bottom line is clear that Governor Hochul has turned her back on the communities and residents we represent. 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, it's hard to comprehend Governor Hochul's refusal to help Steuben County. It makes no sense. It's wrong. Families, businesses, and communities throughout Steuben County were devastated and are still struggling to recover. It's unconscionable that Governor Hochul would simply decide to say, 'tough luck.' She needs to finally declare that 'help is on the way' and provide the direct assistance that's needed."

The legislators said that federal and state emergency aid has been delivered to help repair public infrastructure, including assistance for rebuilding 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.

Most importantly, they said, there has been overwhelming assistance and support from neighboring communities and not-for-profit organizations, including the **United Way of the Southern Tier**.

Nevertheless, last September the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) initially denied the state's request for Individual Assistance in the form of direct grants to victims, and then rejected the state's appeal of the denial earlier this year.

In February, the Hochul administration announced that \$1 million in emergency repair grants were being made available to eligible homeowners whose primary residences were damaged by the storm.

**But O'Mara, Palmesano, Byrnes, and Giglio stress that the state has failed to ensure that this emergency aid could be used to reimburse homeowners 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.**

**The legislators said,** "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 is already an uncertain economic climate."

They charge that the state has ignored ongoing needs in Steuben County, despite repeated requests for help and despite reassurances from the Hochul administration that the grant program would be amended to include reimbursable costs for homeowners. Furthermore, they believe that the state has more than enough funding available to effectively address local needs.

In the immediate aftermath of the flash flooding that hit the county last August 17 and 18, causing an estimated \$35 million in damages to infrastructure, businesses, and homes, the area lawmakers called on Hochul to immediately provide direct state assistance to Steuben County's flooding victims. Specifically, they asked the governor to:

- > authorize the state to fully assume the local share of disaster-related costs; and
- > provide direct state grants of \$10,000-\$25,000 help cover the costs of repairing and rebuilding for homeowners, and grants of \$25,000-\$50,000 for businesses.

O'Mara, Palmesano, Byrnes, and Giglio sent letters to the governor and have had repeated discussions with top Hochul administration officials pointing out that the state has provided this type of assistance to flooding victims following severe storms in recent years.

**In a January 18, 2022 letter to Hochul**, the legislators wrote, "We know that you are well aware, especially from your past experience as a local leader, how this type of historic flooding that destroys homes, businesses, personal property, roads, bridges, culverts, and other local infrastructure – not to mention the agricultural and environmental impacts -- places enormous strain and stress on local communities, governments, individuals and families, farmers, and property taxpayers. Consequently, we urge you to also immediately make direct state aid and other assistance available to individual homeowners, businesses, farms, and the municipalities themselves – as the State of New York has done for hard-hit communities in the recent past."

Yates County, Mohawk Valley, Lake Ontario, and Sullivan County residents and businesses all received direct grant assistance from the state of New York, they added.

At their news conference today, the legislators charged that their ongoing efforts on behalf of Steuben County have fallen on deaf ears.

**They also noted that Hochul immediately secured \$27 million in state grants last September to aid undocumented immigrants in New York City** within days after Hurricane Ida hit the area. She then also secured an additional \$25 million in state funding in the 2022-23 state budget -- a total of \$52 million in assistance for the city's undocumented immigrants while residents, businesses, and communities in rural Steuben County were and still are being ignored.

Additionally, the legislators cited that 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.

**O'Mara, Palmesano, Byrnes, and Giglio said,** "It has not gone unnoticed that Governor Hochul was quick to come to the rescue elsewhere. In late September last year, in the wake of Hurricane Ida and the toll it inflicted on many New York City residents, Governor Hochul immediately provided \$27 million in emergency state grant funding to come to the aid of 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. It was the right thing to do and over the past year we have patiently worked with the Hochul administration to secure similar state grants for the residents we represent. If it's the right thing to do for undocumented immigrants in New York City, why isn't it the right thing to do for homeowners, families, and businesses in rural Steuben County? Our requests have been ignored. The state clearly has the resources to do it and Governor Hochul needs to respond now for our communities, businesses, and families in Steuben County."

**Steuben County Manager Jack Wheeler said,** "We sincerely thank State Senator O'Mara, Assemblyman Palmesano, Assemblywoman Byrnes, and Assemblyman Giglio for their tireless advocacy on behalf of the victims of the August 18<sup>th</sup> flood. They have worked around the clock to ensure our collective voice is heard in Albany that our homeowners and businesses continue to struggle to financially recover. Allowing retroactive reimbursement

in the form of individual grants would be the most common sense and impactful approach the state can take to properly assist our impacted residents.”

**Town of Woodhull Supervisor Scott Grant said,** “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.”