

Cleanup continues in the aftermath of Silverhill tornado

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by **Andrea Williamson Brooks**

SILVERHILL, Ala. — Damage assessments from the tornado that struck Silverhill last Wednesday are still being calculated by emergency management teams while cleanup continues and life gets back to normal in the central Baldwin community.

Silverhill Police Chief Kim Wasdin said the adjustors are finishing up their reports and should have some final numbers by the end of the week or the beginning of next week.

“We are still deciding what the status of Little Hall will be and going to try our best to save the building. We will know more by next week. We are so thankful to everyone who came out to assist us. We have some great people in our community,” Wasdin said.

Silverhill Public Works superintendent Steve Williams said while they are still cleaning up debris, they are 90 percent back to where they should be and because of the quick and overwhelming assistance they received from all over the county, the process went very smoothly.

“We had 270 tons of greenery debris picked up and five county trucks came and carried it away for us at no charge. That saved us about \$40,000 because it costs \$17 a ton to dump debris and they were so helpful to us. We had a total of 20 houses with some type of damage but only six or seven with major damage so overall we were very fortunate,” Williams said.

There were only a few residents without insurance, Williams said, but the town doesn't qualify for federal assistance because there wasn't enough people without it. “I am glad most people had insurance but it is sad for those that didn't. Hopefully they will be able to get some help for their damage.”

While some houses only had missing or loose shingles, others had whole roofs and walls missing. “I would estimate around \$250,000-300,000 damage to the houses as it costs about \$10,000 to replace a roof and even more for other repairs,” Williams said.

And amazingly, there were only minor injuries related to the storm as one man was treated and released when his truck was picked up and flipped over at the post office. The only storm-related fatality was Lisa Mead, 40, who was trying to get into the Dollar General Store when lightning struck close to her.

“My understanding is she was trying to open the door to go into Dollar General and lightning struck the door maybe and the force of the lightning stopped her heart. The EMT team came and administered CPR and she was taken to Thomas Hospital. She was in a coma and then put on life support. She was pronounced dead on Friday night (March 11). It is so sad and tragic. I am so sorry for the family,” Wasdin said.

This is the first tornado to hit Silverhill in recent memory, Wasdin said, but the support and assistance received from the community was amazing. “The Baldwin Baptist Disaster Relief Team was right there helping on Wednesday afternoon with their chainsaws.”

Rick Barnhart, Associational Missionary for the Baldwin Baptist Association, said they were fortunate to be so close and able to help so quickly.

“We have 70 people on our team and 40 people on the chainsaw team. On the day of the storm, we had 20 people with chainsaws immediately able to assist that afternoon and helped mostly with tree removal and covering houses with tarps. We spent four days helping and we still have some roof repairs to do in the coming weeks,” Barnhart said.

Able to go onto residents' property and carry debris to the road is an advantage Barnhart said they have as part of the disaster relief team. “The city or county workers can't go on their property without permission but we can and are able to use our equipment to assist in cleanup.”

The supplies needed like plywood and tarps and sheathing were all donated by Lowe's and Barnhart said the community is so supportive in donating items needed for disaster relief throughout the year. “We are fortunate to have VOAD (Volunteer Organization Active in Disaster) and the United Way in Foley helping us get supplies and equipment like a Bobcat tractor and saw and other things. We also had 10 college students from Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, AL, to assist us. They are on Spring Break and came down to help us which was so nice.”

First Baptist Church of Silverhill also served meals for the first 48 hours to the residents who needed it but didn't have to act as a shelter though, Barnhart said. "Several members of our team are also members of FBC Silverhill so the church was very supportive in offering assistance in whatever way they could."

Williams said in addition to all the help they received from the different communities, they also had their stomachs taken care of as well. "Publix sent chips and drinks for us and Magnolia Blossom Cafe and Subway fed us some great meals while we were working. It was amazing to see how people came together when this happened. You can replace houses but you can't replace people."