

Weather cancels president; Sen. Tillis visits Emerald Isle

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Tamara Briley, left, stands in front of the ruins of her home as U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., center, and Boardwalk RV Park owner John "Bubba" McLean talk Monday. (Brad Rich photo)

EMERALD ISLE — Islander Drive was lined with people, Trump flags and American flags flying, and President Donald Trump was due in town to look at tornado damage from Hurricane Dorian.

While a storm was to have brought him to Carteret County, a storm kept him away Monday, as a line of severe thunderstorms moved through the area, scattering the crowd of hundreds and canceling the president's visit.

It didn't however, keep U.S. Senator Thom Tillis, R-N.C., from visiting the tornado damage site earlier in the day.

He arrived around 11:30 a.m. with Ronnie Watson, former mayor of Emerald Isle and owner of the Holiday Trav-L Park, which is near the site where a Thursday morning tornado destroyed or damaged 60 RVs at the Boardwalk RV Park, destroyed Artisan Granite and Marble and severely damaged the Lighthouse Inn and the Salty Pirate Water Park. It also destroyed some campers on a nearby storage lot Mr. Watson owns, plus an ice machine business.

Sen. Tillis, who said he grew up in the coastal town of Jacksonville, Fla., and has lived in mobile homes, talked to owners of destroyed units in the RV park, such as full-time resident Tamara Briley, who walked out of the ruins of her unit and greeted the senator with "welcome to my home."

Sen. Tillis, in response to a question from a reporter, said he already talked to state officials about money for the cleanup and plans to get the process rolling to try to get Federal Emergency Management Agency funds for the disaster.

Once a federal disaster is declared, he said, "I'll get to work on getting the money (from Congress) like we did for (Hurricane) Florence."

Mr. McLean of Cape Carteret, who owns the Boardwalk RV Park, escorted Sen. Tillis to view the damage and introduced him to some of the residents, including Ms. Briley.

In between the senator's visit and the cancellation of the president's visit, Ms. Briley told the News-Times both efforts meant a lot to her and others.

"If it will help us get money and resources to help all of these people, that would be a good thing," she said. "This is very hard for all of us."

Mr. McLean said Ms. Briley is a school nurse in Onslow County.

Another full-time resident who lost his home, Jordan Williams, agreed.

"It's good to know this little community is getting some recognition," he said. "You don't really expect these big names to care, and it's nice that they cared enough to plan to come here."

Mr. Williams said his main concern is that his insurance company has not been responsive. He needs to know how much it will pay, he said, before he can decide whether to buy another unit or rent a residence somewhere else.

Some of the RV park unit owners moved in after Hurricane Florence damaged or destroyed other residences in September 2018.

State Rep. Pat McElraft, a Republican from Emerald Isle, was also on the tour. She said she's working to get state money.

"We have \$1.2 billion in our 'rainy day fund,'" she said, and state money was used a few years ago in a similar situation after tornados hit Greensboro.

She praised Sen. Tillis for coming to Emerald Isle and also mentioned that Gov. Roy Cooper visited the site Saturday.

The governor requested an expedited federal disaster declaration for Hurricane Dorian. He also gave the president a Dorian briefing today on Air Force One, according to the governor's office.

"We want to help these people," Rep. McElraft said. "And it's good that our officials can come and see what happened and learn about the impacts."

The town, she said, is a shining example of neighbor-helping-neighbor.

"People who didn't even know the people they were helping were out here helping over the weekend," she said. "Our businesses brought food and drinks out. But the people here are going to need help. We're all going to do the best we can to help them."

She said she hopes FEMA would come through, as well as the U.S. Small Business Association.

Paul Musco, owner of the Salty Pirate, said he hopes the government can help all who suffered losses.

The Artisan Granite and Marble building ended up on top of his building, and he saw some chairs from his business entangled in power lines.

"It was amazing," he said. "We'll be able to fix our building, but the damage was bad. Thankfully it was at the end of our season."

The water slides in the park were not damaged.

Also between the senator's visit and the president's cancellation, Boardwalk RV Park resident Ron White said he thought it was good both politicians planned visits Monday, as long as they were going to try to help, not campaign. He said Sen. Tillis had been "very nice and seemed very concerned."

His home was totaled, but he, like Ms. Briley, wasn't home at the time, having heeded the town's mandatory evacuation call.

Resident John Flick and his wife, Joanne, were at home on the oceanfront in the park when the water spout crossed onto the land near the intersection of Islander Drive and Reed Drive.

"It was scary as hell," he said, although his home wasn't damaged. "We saw it coming. It looked like it was coming right at us. We got into the bathroom. Then it got deathly quiet and it was gone. I think it missed us by about 50 yards.

"The next thing we knew, Emerald Isle EMS was knocking on doors, checking on people. It's a miracle no one was seriously hurt or killed," he recounted.

The American Red Cross was also on site Monday, and Mr. McLean said he hopes the organization can help quickly with food, clothing and other needs of the residents who lost their homes.

Some are staying in expensive motels, and few if any are wealthy, he said.

"It's going to take a while for the residents to get back on their feet," he said. "We all need to help each other."

James Jarvis of the Red Cross said he was hard at work.

Trillium Health Resources, the region's managed care organization, was also on scene, providing information to Mr. McLean to hand out to those who might need counseling services.

Kris Kastner of Trillium said many people don't realize they need help after disasters until much later, when the reality sets in.

As the quickly growing crowd waited for President Trump to arrive, there was a bit of a rally atmosphere, with people waving flags and holding up signs, some spontaneously cheering.

There were a few Democrats or Democratic Party supporters in the crowd, evidenced by campaign shirts, but most were supporters of the president, and it felt a bit like the build-up to a campaign rally.

"I'm really excited," Loretta Alexander, an Emerald Isle resident, said. "I saw him back in the 90s, when he was a businessman, and caught his eye at the U.S. Open (tennis tournament in New York City)."

She was there with Emerald Isle resident Brenda Livingston, who said she wanted the president to see "how we came together" to help each other.

"Emerald Isle is just one big family," she added.

"And I hope this can shine a light on the damage here and in other parts of the state's coast and help get some federal funds."

Carteret County Commissioner Bob Cavanaugh was on scene and said it was fitting President Trump was coming to a county where he said 72% of those who cast ballots in 2016 supported him. The actual number was 70.3%.

"It's very nice of him to take the time to come and see the damage that happened here," Mr. Cavanaugh said.

A presidential visit, he added, could help get federal money rolling.

Bill Fathauer, who said he lives about two blocks from the tornado site, also said he was glad the president was making the effort to see the damage.

"It doesn't matter what (political) side you're on" when a disaster strikes a community, he said. When things like the tornado happen, "people have to put aside their political differences. We're one nation."

The president spoke at a campaign rally in Fayetteville at about 7 p.m. Monday.

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