

Lack of affordable housing has deadly consequences

Tornado strike kills 20 in Central Florida

Ric Size

10 February 2007

Three tornadoes lashed through central Florida in the early morning hours on February 2, killing 20 people. Separate twisters touched down between 3:00 and 4:00 a.m. local time, the first in the rural community of Lady Lake, killing six people, and a few minutes later a second one swept through the small town of Paisley, claiming another 13 lives. Most of the victims were asleep and unaware of any impending danger. It is estimated that over 1,500 homes were destroyed or heavily damaged and that the cost of the storms will exceed \$100 million.

Not surprisingly, the most severe devastation took place in the mobile home parks, which have continued to thrive in Florida due to the shortage of affordable housing combined with stagnating wages for working families. While the central Florida median household income has risen 16 percent since 2000, the median existing-home sales price has increased 138 percent. Census data from the year 2000 showed that 10 percent of Floridians, over 1 million residents, live in manufactured homes.

The recent “housing boom” has only accelerated this trend as many prospective home buyers are being squeezed out of the market by skyrocketing real estate prices. The median home sale price in Orange County (Orlando area), just south of where the tornadoes struck, was just under \$260,000 in March 2006. According to Florida Home Loans, a private mortgage lender that publishes data on housing market trends, there was a more than 50 percent increase in the average market sale price for all homes in the state of Florida between June 2004 and June 2006.

It is in this context that the loss of 20 lives needs to be understood, as mobile home living increasingly becomes the only affordable option for working class families, the disabled, and the elderly on fixed incomes.

And it is these people who are most vulnerable during a tornado or hurricane.

The Fujita Scale, which uses observed damage to determine a tornado’s wind speed, considers an F-1 tornado—with wind speeds from 73 to 112 mph—as a “moderate” twister. Nevertheless, an F-1 tornado will tear off roof surfaces and overturn mobile homes. The tornadoes that whipped through Lady Lake and Paisley were graded at F-3, with winds at 150-165 mph.

Most trailer parks in Florida are not equipped with storm cellars or an equivalent form of storm shelter. Therefore those taken by surprise had no chance to get to safety. Toothless building codes for manufactured homes, enacted after the destruction wreaked by Hurricane Andrew in 1994, were meant to ensure these structures could withstand 100 mph winds, an absurdly low minimum as recent storm seasons have proven. But even this modest starting point hasn’t been reached, evidenced by the fact that nearly three out of every four existing mobile homes in Florida are of pre-Hurricane Andrew vintage.

The web site for the Florida Division of Emergency Management warns that Florida, due to its unique geography, has two tornado seasons: a summer season and a more deadly spring season beginning in February and running through April. The dipping of the jet stream into Florida meeting with warm tropical air from the Gulf of Mexico can create a squall line of rapidly moving supercells, which in turn can spawn violent tornadoes. These so-called mesocyclones are just as likely to occur after midnight as they are in the afternoon. In fact, nine years earlier this same scenario occurred just south of Orlando when several twisters roared through Kissimmee toward the Atlantic coast at about 11:00 p.m. on February 22, 1998, killing 42 people.

This loss of life is largely preventable with an adequate warning system and available emergency shelters. Unbelievably, Florida still does not have an emergency tornado siren system, a cost-effective and proven solution that has been saving lives for decades in tornado-alley states. The official discussion over such a relatively inexpensive remedy quickly descends into what can be best described as a quagmire of hypocrisy and impotence as local, state, and federal bureaucrats pontificate over issues such as whether sirens will actually be heard.

Volusia County Chairman Frank Bruno typified this approach when he stated, in a blame-the-victim style worthy of a cabinet position in the Bush administration, “I really believe that individuals have to take responsibility for themselves and their families.” He then went on to lobby in favor of tax credits for at-home weather radios while not bothering to explain how someone asleep in the middle of the night was supposed to “take responsibility for themselves” when an F-3 tornado hits with no warning.

The official reaction in the media to the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s response has been colored with a self-awareness that everybody is watching after the agency’s debacle in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Florida Governor Charlie Crist made all the requisite photo-ops, while stating, “This isn’t Louisiana, we’re going in, and we’re going in hard,” and new FEMA director David Paulison has promised temporary housing for the displaced. But early returns from the most devastated areas tell of delays and frustration for storm victims as they try to obtain federal disaster relief aid. FEMA spokesperson James McIntyre outlined a “two-week timetable” before any decision on relief would be given in order to “manage expectations,” then further explaining “we don’t want people to get their hopes up thinking the check is in the mail tomorrow.”

A clear indicator that no check will be forthcoming for many residents was given one week before the killer tornadoes, when FEMA denied a request for aid for victims of a tornado strike over a month earlier. On Christmas in Volusia County, 59 mobile homes in three different parks were demolished and another 133 mobile homes, 22 houses, and three apartment buildings were badly damaged. As of six weeks later, no FEMA housing trailers have been dispatched for

those left homeless.

The official explanation for the aid denial was “because assessed damage to uninsured property in Volusia [County] wasn’t high enough for the federal government to step in.” Republican Congressman John Mica added, “We’re not hanging our hopes on the appeals; some of those homes were old and don’t qualify for assistance to repair them.” To this reporter’s knowledge, no one followed up by asking if there would be federal assistance in the event of uninsured country clubs being wiped out.

Noel Castro, a father of three who earns \$9.50 an hour, lost his mobile home in Deland on Christmas. He had been paying \$300 a month in lot rent, and had to move his family into a house that rents for \$850 a month while waiting for FEMA aid that never arrived. “That’s the government for you, especially the politicians,” he said. “When they want your vote they come around asking for help, they kiss your babies, but when those babies are homeless they don’t care.”



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