

One year since the tornado disaster in Joplin, Missouri

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More than 5,000 people marched through the city of Joplin, Missouri Tuesday afternoon, in a solemn procession to commemorate the massive tornado that struck a year ago, killing 161 people, injuring hundreds more, and laying waste to more than one-third of the city.

The storm was rated E-5, the highest level of intensity, and was more than a mile wide. It cut a path eight miles long and 25 to 30 blocks wide, destroying 7,500 homes, the city's only high school, one of its two hospitals, and most of the city's downtown.

The four-mile Walk of Unity concluded at Cunningham Park, across the street from the shattered ruin of St. John's Hospital, where there was a moment of silence at 5:41 p.m., the time the tornado touched down on the outskirts of Joplin, a city of 50,000. There was also a stop for a groundbreaking ceremony at the site where Joplin High School is to be rebuilt.

The total damage inflicted by the storm has been estimated at nearly \$3 billion, with \$2 billion in insurance claims filed, of which about \$1.5 billion has been paid out so far.

Total federal, state and local government aid to the city's residents comes to only \$500 million, and much of this consists of loans and local bond issues—like the \$62 million bond for the new high school—which must be repaid through local taxes. Of that \$500 million, an estimated \$100 million went to contractors who hauled away some three million cubic yards of debris.

The rebuilding of the city, particularly in the poorer neighborhoods where residents did not have adequate insurance, has depended heavily on an outpouring of volunteer labor, reflecting the enormous public sympathy for the victims of the tornado. City officials estimated that 130,000 volunteers have contributed to the rebuilding of Joplin.

Of the approximately 7,500 homes destroyed by the tornado, about half are either rebuilt or have received permits for construction—meaning that for nearly 4,000 families, there has been little change since May 22, 2011. They are still living in temporary accommodations or doubled up with friends or relatives. More than 100 of the 553 small businesses wrecked by the storm have been unable to reopen.

Not only is the rebuilding slow and tentative, but the issues of public safety exposed by the tornado's death toll—the highest for a single such storm in US history—have not yet been addressed.

The subsoil of Joplin is quite rocky, making it prohibitively expensive and difficult for homeowners to dig basements or other below-ground storm shelters. Many residents have rebuilt with “safe rooms”—fortified places above ground that have become more common.

A long-term recovery plan endorsed by city officials in January calls for the creation of four new business districts, essentially spreading out the risk rather than concentrating it in a central downtown.

Nearly a year after the storm, in late April, the city of Joplin had still not received federal funding to replace signal lights and more than 2,000 street signs carried away by the tornado. The swathe of land swept by the storm is also completely bare of trees and bushes, which were uprooted en masse.

President Obama and Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, a Democrat, took part in Monday's commencement exercise for Joplin High School seniors, and Nixon also attended a series of events on Tuesday, the actual anniversary.

Both Obama and Nixon spoke more as preachers, bringing religious consolation, than representatives of federal and state governments that have responsibility

for alleviating the conditions of the tornado victims and helping them rebuild.

Obama gave a homily to the Joplin High graduates, declaring that the city should be known from what happened after the disaster, not during it. He invoked the Bible to present suffering as redemptive, declaring, “We can make true what’s written in Scripture—that ‘tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance, character, and hope.’”

Nixon sounded the same theme, attending a sunrise service Tuesday, and saying, “It is so fitting to begin this day, this anniversary, by reflecting on our faith as dawn breaks over a renewed Joplin. Scripture tells us that the path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.”

The religious bromides aside, however, neither Obama nor the Missouri governor made any further pledge of federal or state assistance for the rebuilding of Joplin. The total cost of the disaster recovery—\$2.8 billion so far—is less than the US military spends on the Afghanistan war in a week. It is also less than the average wealth of the billionaire parasites who comprise the Forbes 400 list of the richest Americans.



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