

[By Chris Garofolo](#)

The White House has declared a major disaster area in flood-ravaged Vermont just hours after U.S. Rep. Peter Welch said the state formally asked President Barack Obama for federal aid. The Vermont Democrat, who was in Brattleboro Thursday to tour some of the damage in town, said Gov. Peter Shumlin made the request that will make 13 counties in the Green Mountain State eligible for federal assistance with public infrastructure repairs. Vermont was slammed earlier this week by Tropical Storm Irene, causing millions of dollars in damage to roads and bridges.

"Sens. [Patrick] Leahy, [Bernie] Sanders and I are going to be working with FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]," Welch said. "There are 60 members of Congress whose districts have been effected by Irene, so my goal is to have all of us work together to make certain that ... we do get the resources to the communities that have been hit so hard by this act of God."

President Obama signed the declaration to make individual assistance available for homeowners in Chittenden, Rutland, Washington and Windsor counties and public assistance for infrastructure in all counties statewide except Grand Isle.

Shumlin said the state applied for individual assistance from FEMA for the four counties initially because that's where damage assessments were completed quickest.

The individual assistance can include grants for temporary housing and home repairs and low-cost loans to cover uninsured losses. The public assistance is for reimbursing state and local governments for their expenses in dealing with damage from flooding from Tropical Storm Irene.

"We need to get the federal assistance approved and into the state as quickly as possible," said Shumlin, a first-term Democrat. "The President and FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate have pledged the full support of the federal government to help Vermont recover from the devastation left in the storm's wake. We will begin moving forward with this declaration request and add the additional counties as the assessments are completed."

Vermont has already received an Emergency Declaration for Federal Assistance to provide immediate assistance for emergency disaster relief efforts. Thursday's request begins a more formal process of seeking full assistance for roads, bridges, homeowners and businesses, and other relief work.

The state congressional delegation released a statement shortly after 6 p.m. on Thursday, thanking the president for his "quick and decisive action to help Vermonters deal with one of the worst natural disasters in the state's history."

"We expect the president will provide additional assistance in some of the most hard-hit areas of Vermont as additional information becomes available," the trio reports in the statement.

With the declaration of a major disaster area in Vermont, businesses will qualify for assistance through the Small Business Administration.

During his site visit to Brattleboro, Welch said it will take more than recovery funding to get small businesses back on their feet.

"They have to get cash flow coming back in and put folks back to work," he said.

Brattleboro Selectboard Chairman Dick DeGray agreed, saying local business owners will have to become more vocal about the opportunities in Vermont's downtowns and villages.

"Local businesses will have to try to get the word out that Vermont is still open, not every place is devastated. It's going to be huge so we could get tourist dollars coming into our state," DeGray said.

In addition, Welch lauded the local emergency response and highway crews for their work in clearing roads and rescuing motorists stuck in the flooding.

"Unfortunately, you guys have too much experience with disasters down here," he said, referring to Irene, the Brooks House fire in April and last month's shooting at the Brattleboro Food Co-op.

"I'm here to learn, find out what I can do and how I can help, but I'm impressed," he continued. "It's just amazing how the local response has been. [It's] been so good, and it has to be."

Town Manager Barbara Sondag said crews have continued to work with assistance from United Way of Windham County and other nonprofits to "get people who want to help to where the need is." The town is organizing the resources for Brattleboro residents in the form of a website, she added.

"One of the things we have been trying to get out to people is that they need to do the work that needs to be done now," Sondag said. "They need to be cleaning out, they need to be throwing away, they need to be cleaning up. But at the same time, they need to be documenting ... particularly if you're a business and you have an inventory."

Today, the congressman is visiting washed-out sites and Red Cross staging areas in Rutland and Killington to survey the damage in western Vermont after Irene.

"I think all of us are going to understand that this is going to be something that we're going to work on for quite a while, day-in and day-out. But if we keep working together, we can get to where we need to be," Welch added.