

[Burlington Free Press](#)

Photos of the damage Vermont suffered in Tropical Storm Irene went a long way, Rep. Peter Welch said. The images convinced a reluctant Congress that the need for federal aid was real.

Sharing those photographs with every member of the House was one of several approaches Welch said helped win an agreement Monday between House and Senate budget negotiators to replenish a depleted federal emergency aid fund, lift a cap on aid available to each state and extend a deadline to complete emergency road repairs.

The deal is contingent on votes in the House and Senate this week.

Those moves will bring Vermont an additional \$75 million to \$150 million in reimbursements for road repairs. That means the state will be able to make the repairs without putting the next several years' worth of planned road projects on hold, Vermont Transportation Secretary Brian Searles said.

The deal matches the "best-case scenario" Vermont officials had hoped for, and they rejoiced Monday at word from Washington of the deal they had been awaiting anxiously from a deeply divided Congress.

"We couldn't be happier," Searles said.

"It's a remarkable achievement for Vermont," Welch said.

Gov. Peter Shumlin previously had said Vermont would be facing the equivalent of a "second Irene" without the increase in federal aid. Monday he said in a written statement: "I cannot overstate how critical this bill is to our state. This is the difference between a financial calamity

for Vermonters already facing tough times and our ability to now rebuild Vermont better than Irene found us."

The deal:

- Adds \$1.662 billion to the Federal Highway Administration emergency fund, which will pay for repairs in Vermont and other states that were hit by the Aug. 28 storm.
- Lifts a \$100 million per state/per year/per storm cap on emergency highway aid. Vermont expects that Irene road damage will amount to \$175 million to \$250 million. Up to \$100 million will be reimbursed at 100 percent and after that at 80 percent by the federal government, Searles said.
- Lifts a 180-day deadline for repairs to be eligible for federal reimbursement. That will allow Vermont to continue emergency repairs after winter, Searles said.
- Includes a vehicle weight waiver to allow tractor-trailers on interstates in Vermont and Maine. The move will make permanent a temporary waiver that had been in place.

The boost in aid has been approved routinely for states with other storms, but House Republicans had threatened not to pass the measure this time without a corresponding offset in spending. Welch said that forming a coalition of 55 members — Democrats and Republicans — from states affected by Irene helped convince House leaders the aid was essential, without hinging it on immediate cuts to other programs.

Welch said that when he met with House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, House Speaker John Boehner or other Republicans who hold the keys to decisions, he had Republicans with him from states that also needed the money.

Holding face-to-face meetings by appointment to explain the situation to those leaders also was

crucial, Welch said.

"The Republican leaders gave me time to make the case," he said. "This would have been just ruinous to our budget and our economy."

Welch said he also sent every member of the House a packet of information about the damage Vermont suffered, along with photographs showing surging floodwaters, severed roads and destroyed homes. "I had members comment on those," he said. "Those photos were very compelling."

The Senate is slated to vote on the transportation budget bill today, when Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., is expected to make the case for the funding on the Senate floor. The House is expected to vote Thursday, Welch said.