

[By Josh Stilts](#)

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said he wants to know how federal disaster relief programs helped or failed Vermonters in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene.

Welch spent Friday afternoon in Wilmington and Newfane as part of a series of visits to small businesses to hear how they've coped dealing with those programs.

Just because many of Vermont's main roads have been rebuilt, Welch said that doesn't mean the work is over.

"For many people driving along the main roads it looks as if the storm never happened, but for a lot of people the damage is still fresh," he said.

In Wilmington, North Star Bowl owner Steve Butler, who watched as his candlepin bowling alley was filled up with more than five feet of water, expressed his distaste for the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"FEMA is a four-lettered word," Butler told Welch.

Butler said the agency did little in the way to help him foot the more than \$800,000 cost of rebuilding and if it hadn't been for the generosity of others he might never have been able to reopen.

"If it wasn't for Friends of the Deerfield Valley and all the volunteers that helped clean up, this couldn't have happened," he told Welch.

Funded solely by donations from residents, second homeowners, local businesses and others from throughout the country, the group raised more than \$210,000 in four months to help 111 people affected by the historic flood.

Welch said he was humbled by the people of Wilmington.

"This is an amazing success story," he said. "To see how these people are coming together to rebuild this place is truly remarkable."

Welch said the disaster was a "tale of two Vermonts."

"For a lot of people it was just a really rainy day, but for many others it was the worst disaster they've ever seen," he said.

In the hours and days that followed some of the most disastrous flooding Windham County has ever seen, it was the local businesses and volunteers that stepped up to the plate and helped those in need.

Welch said it was because of businesses like Mount Snow and WW Building Supply in Newfane that the area was able to bounce back as quickly as it did.

"I was so impressed with them," he said. "It was an all-hands-on-deck response."

Over the coming weeks, Welch is scheduled to meet with other local businesses across the state with the intent to bring the feedback to the House Irene Coalition -- a bipartisan group of lawmakers whose districts were affected by the storm.

In Newfane, Welch met with WW Building Supply owners Ed and Terri Druke.

A few days after the flood, the Druke's had supplies going in and out of many Windham County towns to start the rebuilding process.

"You guys were critical ... ground zero for people getting back on their feet," Welch said. "You're an inspiring Vermont story."

When asked about his experience dealing with FEMA, Ed said they didn't have one.

"If I didn't need the help I didn't take it because I knew others did," he said.

He told Welch the business was able to keep everyone working during the recovery with tight management of funds and scheduling everything out in advance.

"We were so busy getting culverts to towns," he said. "At first we couldn't get deliveries for two weeks in Newfane and longer in Wilmington but it worked. I had a very busy year because of the flood and it was good to see everyone buying locally."

During his visit, Welch said he was encouraged by the spirit of Vermonters and is confident the work will get done.

Driving along Dover Road, Welch said his eyes were opened to the amount of work that still needs to be done.

"There were still bridges being worked on and many damaged homes, some probably condemned," he said.

Welch said the challenge in Washington will be finding more funding and alleviating paperwork for people in need.

"Our office is continuing to work with businesses and home owners to get through the paperwork," he said. "It's frustrating when you have to work through so much following a disaster."

North Star Bowl could be ready to reopen the candlepin lanes as early as Wednesday, and the downtown Wilmington location of WW Building Supply is scheduled for a grand reopening in May.

"I'm the luckiest guy in the world," he said. "Nobody has been given a second chance like this so I'm going to do whatever I can to give back."

Butler said he's going to continue to hold fundraiser at the bowling alley whenever possible.