

Opening Remarks
Joint Hearing
Statewide Disaster Assistance Program
Sen. Lisa Baker
9/27/11

Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee brought historic flooding to more than 29 counties in Pennsylvania. Just two-thirds of the way through the year, the Commonwealth has already been struck by repeated torrential rains, flash flooding, an earthquake, tornadoes, a hurricane and a tropical storm. More may be on the way, and we must be prepared. When disaster hits, relief usually comes from the federal government. But many communities suffering severe damage may still fall short of qualifying for federal aid.

For example, Plymouth Borough and Plymouth Township in Luzerne County were recently saturated with seven inches of rain in three hours, causing flash flooding. Millions of dollars in damage to homes, roads and bridges may not add up to eligibility for federal aid. For a small community, damage costs can be equivalent to their entire budget for the year.

Pennsylvania lacks a state disaster assistance program. The National Emergency Management Association reports that more than 25 states have either a separate disaster fund for which money is appropriated, or a trust fund which has dedicated funding. A handful of states have both. There are many examples for Pennsylvania to draw from.

With the increasing public pressure to control spending, we must be careful and fiscally responsible in the way we set up a disaster assistance fund. While the state cannot be the ultimate insurer for all people, it is a core function of government to protect life and property. If recovery funds are not available at the federal or state levels, local taxpayers could be left shouldering the burden, or families and businesses are left with crushing bills.

Proposals to eliminate the state store system typically call for the elimination of the Johnstown Flood Tax. Instead, perhaps this tax can be redirected toward financing a state disaster assistance fund. Or, as an alternative, Governor Corbett recently indicated that unallocated funds in this year's budget could be directed to disaster relief.

For victims whose lives have been devastated or severely disrupted by natural disaster, this is not a philosophical question. It is a very practical consideration of need and fairness. Those who have seen homes and businesses wiped out should not be penalized because the economy is stagnant.

Today's experts will help us decide how to structure a state disaster assistance fund, who should be eligible, and how to assure that money is properly spent. I thank everyone for the lessons of experience and constructive recommendations they bring.

At this time, I would like to recognize Chairman Steve Barrar, followed by Sen. Solobay and Rep. Sainato.