



Rebuilding: Gaylord one year after its first tornado

DIANNA STAMPFLER | THURSDAY, MAY 11, 2023



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Many of the businesses damaged during the tornado have reopened.



There were no sirens that day. Given the rarity of tornadoes in northern Michigan, cities like Gaylord (Otsego County) aren't equipped with such emergency alert systems. So, when an EF3 tornado touched down heading for the community of just under 4,300 on the afternoon of Friday, May 20, 2022, residents were notified by a CodeRED text message. Those on the west side of town were afforded a seven-minute warning -- as many as 11 minutes for those on the east side. This was the first tornado to hit Gaylord – ever.

A storm was brewing ...

The National Weather Service-Gaylord unit – which includes several northern Michigan counties from Lake Michigan to Lake Huron – noted tumultuous weather throughout its region that day as storms blew in from Wisconsin, with wind speeds of 76 mph at the lighthouse in Frankfort (Benzie County). The storm traveled northeast producing damaging winds across Leelanau and Antrim counties and as it moved away from a coastal cold front, it transitioned into a supercell thunderstorm. Around 3 p.m., the NWS launched a special weather balloon to monitor the situation, gathering data about this intensifying storm.

It wouldn't take long before it developed into something more severe (as the afternoon timeline to the right shows).

From start to finish, the 200-yard-wide tornado was on the ground for 22 minutes, traveling 17.8 miles at around 150 miles per hour. Two people, residents of the Nottingham Forest Mobile Home Park, were killed and more than 40 others were injured. In all, about 30 businesses and 210 homes were damaged by the tornado (33 of those homes were completely destroyed and 30 had about 50 percent damage to the structure).

**The Hobby Lobby building was destroyed by the
tornado.**

There have been 191 tornadoes in northern Michigan since 1950 (averaging two or three per year), with only two others with the strength of Gaylord's tornado – 1991 and 1976. This was noted as the deadliest EF3 tornado to touch down in Michigan since 1980; the last EF3 in the state occurred on March 15, 2012, in Dexter (Washtenaw

County), where no deaths or serious injuries were reported.

The immediate aftermath ...

Lt. Vence Woods, an environmental investigations supervisor for the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE), was at the Gaylord District Office on the north side of M-32 when he saw the tornado touch down across the road as it was headed east. He grabbed emergency equipment and set out to help, stopping first at Nottingham Forest less than a half-mile away. There, he met up with other first responders to begin search and rescue operations, all while natural gas was filling the air and putting them at further risk for injury or death. They were able to rescue several residents in the manufactured housing community, which was nearly obliterated.

Nearby, Det. Chris Bowen (also with EGLE), assisted more than two dozen people injured by broken glass and other debris. He also helped other rescuers dig through what remained of the Hobby Lobby building, working around electrical, water and gas lines that had ruptured.

Both men were recognized for their bravery and service during the Michigan Natural Resources Commission's February 2023 meeting – Bowen was presented with a Distinguished Service Award while Woods was presented with that honor as well as a Lifesaving Award.

The timing of the tornado hit the shift change at the Gaylord City Police and Department of Public Works (DPW), meaning there were twice as many personnel on hand who were sent out into the field to assist the city's volunteer fire department, Michigan State Police (which has a post in Gaylord), DNR officers and other municipal officials to access and manage the situation. Community leaders including Chris Martin, fire chief; Frank Claeys, police chief; Erin Mann, disaster recovery coordinator; John Deming, Otsego County emergency manager; Kim Awry, city manager, and others banded together to come up with a plan moving forward – including implementing a temporary curfew to aid in keeping residents safe after dark.

Performance Plus was among the businesses

destroyed during the tornado.

Without missing a beat, American Red Cross volunteers set up a shelter at the E-Free Church two miles east downtown on M-32 and a Crisis Center was established north of town at University Center. A local state of emergency was declared which activated emergency response and recovery plans. That evening, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer was on-site surveying the damage.

“I have declared a state of emergency for Otsego County to rush resources to the affected areas, and the State Emergency Operations Center has been activated to coordinate our state's response,” Whitmer said on the evening of the tornado. “Our state is grateful for the first responders and utility workers who are working hard to keep everyone safe. Michiganders are tough. We are resilient. And there’s no challenge we can’t get through together.”

Such action by the governor not only allowed for the allocation of state resources to assist with local response and recovery efforts, but it was the first step in requesting national relief from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Unfortunately, after a financial evaluation of the destruction and loss, it was determined that the city did not meet the \$16 million threshold of uninsured damage to qualify for FEMA funding.

A community comes together...

The Otsego Community Foundation quickly established the Gaylord Long Term Recovery Group (GLTRG) which continues to foster the community’s capacity to respond to the needs of tornado survivors. From this came the Tornado Response Fund, where more than 1,400 individuals collectively donated more than \$1.6 million (above the \$1.5 million goal), which was then funneled to organizations like Otsego-Antrim Habitat for Humanity, Otsego County United Way, Michigan Disaster Response and Recovery and The Refuge – a non-profit founded in 2013 to provide shelter and other basic services to those in need. Since the night of the tornado,

The Refuge has helped 92 people (including children) by providing more than 1,600 overnight stays. The United Way also assisted with the temporary housing, as well as providing residents with much-needed toiletries, food, gas cards and other supplies. The organization also helped find or provide transportation between home, school and work.

The veterans who purchased the Gaylord Bowling Center in 2017 rallied to the rescue of those who suffered automobile damage. A post on the center's Facebook page read, "If you had Tornado damage to your vehicle and have not yet resolved it, please contact us ... we and our partners have a funded program to get you back into reliable transportation. You do not need to be a veteran and there is no veteran preference for this program. Please share with others who may be in need."

Two days after the tornado, a post was made in one of the Gaylord Facebook groups that read:

"A big thank you to Meyer Ace Hardware – Gaylord for providing some fantastic customer service and employing some of the kindest employees. My husband had to replace his chain saw chain after only a few hours of use helping cleaning up a tornado-devasted neighborhood today. Ace replaced the chain and then offered a case of water and snacks for the hundreds of volunteers cleaning up with our family. A very kind employee named Joe was finishing up his shift and asked if he could follow my husband back to the neighborhood to help. Joe then spent hours working and helping clean up this neighborhood he doesn't even live in. I've never met a young man so eager and happy to help people in need. Nice job Ace and its employees for going the extra mile for their community."

**Det. Chris Bowen helped other rescuers dig through
what remained of the Hobby Lobby building.**

As cleanup continued, there was the issue of what to do with all the debris that had been collected – pieces of housing and roofing, cars, boats, campers, trees, signage and random wood, metal and other materials – as well as the cost involved to dispose of such items. GFL Environmental out of Elmira brought large dumpsters to the Otsego County Fairgrounds and in the weeks after the tornado, the city's DPW hauled away 30,000 yards of vegetative debris that was disposed of in a giant hole in a remote area of Elk Park south of downtown (saving the city the cost of paying to have it all ground up).

A year later, the work continues...

Most of the businesses along M-32 that were damaged or destroyed by the tornado have been repaired, but it has been a slow-moving process. It took weeks for broken glass to be replaced at Culver's, Panera, Aldi's and other retail outlets. Gordon Food Service, which remained open after the storm, has upgraded its exterior look. Performance Plus, where the staff hunkered down in the oil change bays as the tornado whipped around above them, has been totally rebuilt. Little Caesars – where, ironically, the statue of the cartoon pizza mogul suffered little more than the loss of paint – is being reconstructed and will re-open soon.

The spaces where Jimmy Johns and Hobby Lobby once stood remain empty, although based on the equipment on site rebuilding is on the horizon. Word is Hobby Lobby will be open in time for the holiday season. The Goodwill building was demolished as shoppers huddled inside; however, the logoed front awning remained mostly intact. The thrift store has since relocated to the south side of M-32, just a stone's throw from its previous location.

Inside Nottingham Forest, the tornado's path is evident with wide open spaces right through the center of the park; a handful of new units have been or are being placed to fill the vacant lots. Houses in the neighborhoods on the northeast side of town are in various states of repair. There is the occasional hole in the ground, little more than basements where homes once stood; tarps still cover roofs where shingles were torn off; commercial dumpsters sit in yards, where debris is being collected to be hauled off later; trees with bent trunks or snapped off tops are stark reminders of the storm's strength; and the sounds of hammers and power tools can be heard as progress to rebuild continues.

Anniversary events

The GLTRG has been working on a series of events in conjunction with the one-year anniversary of the tornado, most notably an Emergency Preparedness Expo scheduled for **Thursday, May 18** at Otsego Resort (near the eastern edge of the tornado zone).

This event will give the public the chance to meet with service providers, government agencies, emergency responders, schools, hospital reps, banks, insurance providers, mental health providers, churches and other organizations that have emergency preparedness resources.

It will also provide the various organizations with the opportunity to network with each other to build stronger community systems and plans in the event of other future natural disasters or crises. The Expo is free and will run from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., followed by a presentation of “Everyone Has a Story: Tragedy & Hope” at 6:30 p.m. The cost is \$10 per person.

A community tree planting with Huron Pines and other local organizations like Michigan Community Service Commission, Otsego Wildlife Legacy Society, Rotary Club of Gaylord, DTE Energy Foundation, ReLeaf Michigan and others previously noted will take place on **Friday, May 19** (registration has closed). A Survivors Pancake Breakfast is also planned for **Saturday, May 20** at the Otsego County Fire Department.

The National Weather Service has compiled a detailed account of the Gaylord Tornado, including radar coverage, maps, photographs and other documentation:
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/6cdf6ffb0575491cb8cff3eed911cf3a>

Dianna Stampfler has been writing professionally since high school She is the president of Promote Michigan and is a resident of Gaylord (living less than 2 miles from where the tornado traveled in May 2022).

A timeline of the tornado

3:35 p.m. Tornado touched down just north of Olds Road, east of Alba Highway in Antrim County.

3:36 p.m. Tornado continued northeast across Patterson Road, south of Alba Highway.

3:38 p.m. Tornado crossed Old Aba Road just east of Alba Highway.

3:43 p.m. Tornado crossed Hayes Tower Road, south of Van Tyle Road.

3:44 p.m. Tornado entered Shady Brook Lane, damaging several homes and trees.

3:46 p.m. Tornado continued to travel east-northeast reaching the west side of Gaylord, passing just behind Meijer and crossing M-32 near Murner Road – destroying

the Nottingham Forest Mobile Home Park, Hobby Lobby, Maurices and Jimmy John's and also damaging Culver's, Gordon Food Service, Performance Plus Quick Oil Change, Goodwill, Little Caesars, Panera, Aldi and others in that area.

3:47 p.m. Tornado continued across the north side of the business district, jumping I-75 and moving into the main residential area of town, damaging homes and trees.

3:49 p.m. Tornado crossed Berkshire Lane on the northeast side of town, hitting its peak intensity (where the most significant damage was found).

3:51 p.m. Tornado continued northeast of Gaylord, crossing Goslow Road.

3:55 p.m. Tornado crossed Marquardt Road north of Sparr.

3:57 p.m. Tornado lifted up in a wooded area northeast of Sparr.

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