

Humble thanks from the Gulf: Mayor of Waveland, Miss., visits Wayland to express town's gratitude for storm relief

By Timothy R. Homan / Daily News Correspondent
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WAYLAND -- Town leaders met with the mayor of Waveland, Miss., yesterday to discuss additional relief efforts aimed at rebuilding the Gulf Coast town devastated by Hurricane Katrina more than two months ago.

Mayor Tommy Longo made an impromptu visit to Wayland on his way down from Maine, where he was traveling with his wife and five children. The meeting allowed the Democratic mayor, a lifetime resident of Waveland, to meet members of the town's Hurricane Relief Steering Committee and thank them for their support.

The group is soliciting donations from residents and local businesses to help furnish trailers serving as temporary homes to Waveland residents. They also used the opportunity to hear from Longo to see if local efforts were meeting their needs.

"You're right on target with what the need is now," said Longo.

Some of the biggest challenges are persuading evacuees to return to Waveland and then making sure they have furnished housing, he said.

"Believe me, you've had a major effect on the community," Longo said. "It hasn't gone unnoticed, and we thank you for that."

But Longo acknowledged the frustrating side of rebuilding his mostly blue-collar community of 7,000 residents. He said the Federal Emergency Management Agency has provided only 620 trailers while they need at least 4,000 more.

The mayor also referred to the "ridiculousness" of FEMA's architectural standards for rebuilding the town.

In the meantime, Wayland and other local communities such as Mendon and Holliston are helping to fill the gaps with quality donated goods.

"We stressed: We don't want your junk," said Mendon Selectman Kenneth O'Brien, who was at the Wayland meeting and has been to Waveland twice with relief supplies.

O'Brien continues to lead relief efforts. At yesterday's meeting he announced a plan to provide Waveland with 7,000 boxes full of Christmas presents, stemming from his most recent visit. O'Brien said he met a teacher who said they were slowly telling young children that "Santa Claus won't be here" this year.

O'Brien told her, "Mendon will make sure Santa Claus is here."

While Christmas is still several weeks away, Longo noted that jackets and blankets are already in demand since temperatures dipped down to 40 degrees last week.

In a shaky voice, Longo described in graphic detail the carnage he saw during the three weeks following the hurricane, before substantial aid arrived. He said the most disturbing part was seeing how dangerous it was for children, with stray animals like rottweilers eyeing toddlers as food.

"For a 2-year-old it's not a safe environment yet," he said. "The animal population is different than it was before."

Waveland lost six lives during the hurricane, with two more bodies found earlier this week, Longo said.

Despite all that, the mayor said he tries to focus on the positive whenever he can. To illustrate his point, he said much good has come from evacuees living in other parts of the country.

"A lot of stereotypes are being torn down that would've taken years to do otherwise," Longo said. In his opinion, "The biggest difference is geographical. We're all the same."

Wayland will collect donations at the town landfill, all school lobbies and the Public Safety Building Lobby from Nov. 7 through Dec. 3. Inquiries can be directed to steering committee member Cindy Lombardo at 508-358-5958.

The town also has plans to send high school students to Waveland in the spring to aid the



Waveland, Miss. Mayor Tommy Longo, right, speaks to Wayland officials yesterday about the effects of Hurricane Katrina. (Lisa Cassidy photo)

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rebuilding effort. A proposal to send Thanksgiving turkeys to Longo's town was short-lived when he told committee members there's no place to store them, or even cook them.

Wayland leaders emphasized they are in this for the long run. In describing Waveland as a sister city, Lombardo said, "It really means that it's family because we can build a relationship."

Longo said he looks forward to maintaining the relationship.

"Everyone lost everything professionally and everything personally," said Longo, but adding, "We have a very resilient community."

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