



SIPSEY, ALABAMA

Long-Term Community Recovery Action Strategy
November 2011



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LETTERS OF SUPPORT

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

ROBERT BENTLEY
GOVERNOR



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STATE OF ALABAMA

November 4, 2011

The Honorable Anita Sanders
Mayor of Sipsey
Post Office Box 156
Sipsey, AL 35584

Dear Mayor Sanders:

RE: Long Term Community Recovery Strategic Action Report

Let me begin by saying how very proud I am of the people of Sipsey and Walker County for their incredible resilience in the face of the devastation left in the wake of the April 27th tornado. It is a great honor to be associated with the State of Alabama. Virtually every time I have been in the Walker County area since the storm, I have witnessed unbelievable acts of selflessness, kindness, determination and adaptability among those who have lost so much, and those who have come to provide aid and assistance.

It has been extremely gratifying to see city, county, state and federal officials working closely together and with the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) representatives. I appreciate everyone's efforts – action committee meetings, stakeholder meetings and individual interviews – to craft a recovery plan that supports the long term viability of the Town of Sipsey and those who live in and around it.

In the weeks and months to come, I look forward to staying involved with the citizens of Walker County, the various agencies, both private and public aid organizations including FEMA, to ensure that this plan moves forward effectively and efficiently. We will need all our patience, cooperation, creativity and vision to rebuild the future together.

Sincerely,

Robert Bentley

RB:RM:cf

Enclosure

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

ROBERT BENTLEY
GOVERNOR



STATE OF ALABAMA

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC
AND COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

JIM BYARD, JR.
DIRECTOR

November 4, 2011

The Honorable Anita Sanders
Mayor of Sipsey
Post Office Box 156
Sipsey, AL 35584

Dear Mayor Sanders:

RE: Long Term Community Recovery Strategic Action Report

It has been six months since a devastating tornado struck the community of Sipsey and Walker County, severely disrupting the lives of the people who live and work there. At that time the State of Alabama's emergency response agencies moved swiftly to assist in rescue, debris removal, security, and restoration of essential services. Now the emergency clean-up effort is complete, but there still remains the long process of rebuilding and repairing businesses, homes and public property. I want to assure you that the State's Long Term Community Recovery staff will continue to offer assistance as you work to recover and rebuild.

This rebuilding effort, while painful and difficult, does present some opportunities for the community of Sipsey and Walker County. Local officials are already considering the best way to approach a long term recovery plan. To succeed, that plan must involve all levels of government, as well as local businesses, private organizations and, most importantly, the citizens of Sipsey and Walker County. Together, you have a great opportunity to develop a vision of your community's future, and to create a comprehensive plan to make that vision a reality.

To help Sipsey and Walker County develop their Long Term Recovery Plan, an Alabama Long Term Community Recovery Team representing several agencies throughout the State of Alabama and elsewhere are working closely with the Federal Emergency Management Agency. I strongly endorse this effort. I have directed the participating agencies to identify potential sources of funding to implement and complete projects proposed in the plan. I commend you and the citizens of Sipsey and Walker County for the dedication and willingness you have demonstrated by working together through this difficult time, and I look forward to working with you as the long term recovery effort continues.

Sincerely,

Jim Byard, Jr.
Director

JB:RM:cf

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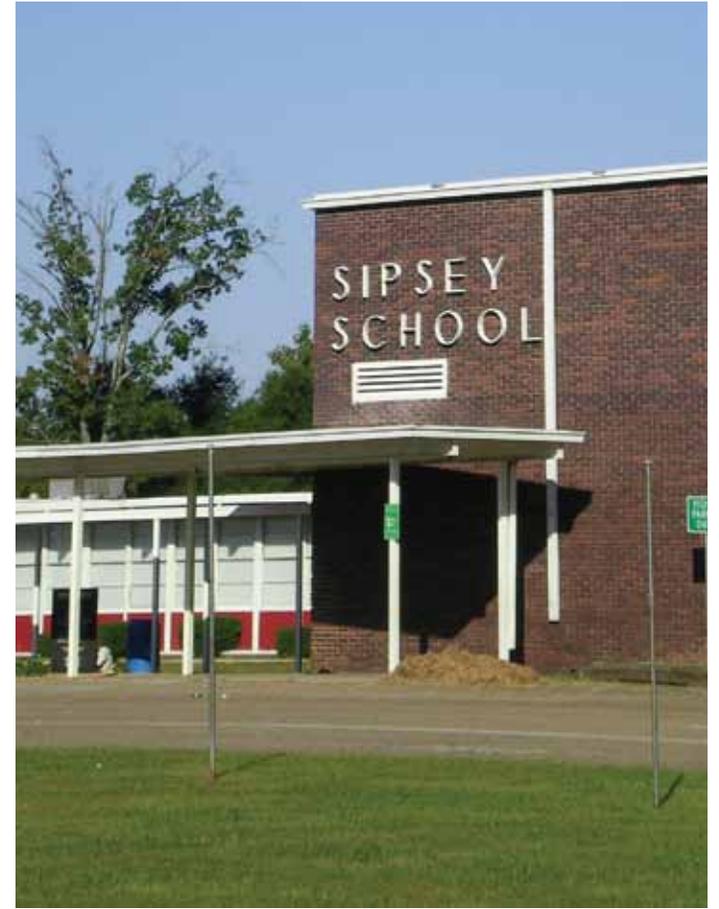


DAMAGES



On the evening of April 27, 2011, a pair of tornadoes — including an EF-3 with winds exceeding 140 mph — struck Sipse, resulting in the death of two residents. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) data, 16 homes were destroyed and 68 homes were rendered unsafe, for a total of 84 homes (or about 30 percent of the housing stock). A neighborhood along First Avenue was particularly hard hit with approximately 50 percent of homes destroyed. Another neighborhood, in a low-lying area near the river, was 100 percent destroyed.

Damage appeared to have occurred in small pockets of the community rather than in large swaths. Preliminary Damage Assessments (PDAs) completed by FEMA Public Assistance indicate damage to public facilities was minimal. The community center, which subsequently served as a shelter, suffered roof damage. One business, B&B Auto, was also damaged. Immediately after the storm, local leaders and volunteers staffed the community center kitchen offering food to citizens. Counselors were also brought in to work with elementary school students.



BACKGROUND



The small town of Sipsey in Walker County, located in rural northwest Alabama, was founded by mining engineer Milton Fies and his wife Rose in 1912. The town was laid out on flat farmland with numbered streets and avenues, and subsequently became a showplace mining village. From the time of the first mine production in 1913 until 1930, Sipsey's coal production was the fourth most prolific in the state and the community grew to almost 900 residents. Many of the original homes were built from local lumber. Sipsey has eight churches within its boundaries and a historic one-room school house that now serves as a community center. Sipsey has a population of 622, according to U.S. Census data estimates for 2009. The town's area is 0.5 square miles.



COMMUNITY CAPACITY



Sipsey's form of government is a mayor and a five-person council. It also has a volunteer fire department and a full-time police department housed in the town hall, which escaped damage. The mayor and other community leaders acknowledge Sipsey's limited capacity for recovery, yet the town's spirit is strong. Town leaders responded quickly to establish a shelter at the community center despite this disaster being the first faced by the town's administration.

There are resources available to the Town of Sipsey. The Walker County Development Authority facilitates business development in the area, as does the Walker County Chamber of Commerce. The Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham (RPCGB) provides planning and economic development services, grant writing designed to address the relationship between transportation and land use, assists in implementation of community projects, and provides small business loans to spark economic development in the region. Additional discussion about addressing capacity needs and creating funding opportunities is included at the end of this document.

“We pray that no disaster in our time or any time in the future will mirror the storms that tore across our state in April.”

–Governor Robert Bentley



ECONOMY

Sipsey has one gas station/convenience store. Other local businesses include a beauty shop, pharmacy, welding shop, small truck crane repair shop, auto body shop and tire shop, and a Dollar General Store. None of these businesses sustained significant tornado damage.

According to 2009 U.S. Census Bureau data, the median household income is \$34,554. Thirty-two percent of families lived below the poverty line in the previous 12 months. Major employers of Walker County residents include Wal-Mart (815), Walker Baptist Medical Center (630), Beville State College (600), and Marshall Durbin (500). The county unemployment rate, pre-disaster, was 9.6 percent.

HOUSING

According to a 2009 estimate of the U.S. Census Bureau, Sipsey had 251 occupied housing units. Of these, 78 percent were made up of single-family detached dwellings and 22 percent consisted of other types of housing such as mobile homes. Most residential units are owner-occupied (64 percent).

Several volunteer groups, including Restore Sipsey Co-op, Inc. (www.restoresipsey.org), have been active in the community assisting individual residents with recovery needs. Restore Sipsey has rebuilt three homes as of October 2011.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Damage throughout Sipsey was sporadic and repairs to electric/communication infrastructure were underway shortly after the storm. Roadways were cleared of debris. Although the power was out for a number of days, it was eventually restored. There was no damage to the water system and Sipsey does not have a wastewater treatment system, relying instead on septic tanks.





RECOVERY ACTIVITIES



The Long-Term Community Recovery (LTCR) Team assigned to Sipsey worked with Mayor Anita Sanders and a local committee. The result of this work was a community planning meeting held at Sipsey Community Center. The community meeting was led by the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham (RPCGB) and the Auburn University Urban Studio (AUUS) with assistance from FEMA LTCR Team members and the Walker Area Community Foundation.

At the meeting, community participants were divided into three groups and asked to answer questions about the most important features of the community and what they would like to see in the future. At the end of the meeting, each group reported their ideas and visions for Sipsey.

Responses from the three groups were consistent. Widely held ideas included: the desire for more programs for all age groups at the community center, improvements and programs at their local park, a regular civic event or festival, more community gathering places, a focal point in the heart of town to include sidewalks, and a potential focal area for future small businesses. It is expected that the RPCGB and AUUS will provide additional assistance relating to these community goals in the near future. A follow-up meeting was held October 16, 2011 with the mayor and other community members. From this discussion, two additional needs — dilapidated buildings and annexation — were brought up by the community.

NUISANCE ABATEMENT

The Sipsey Recovery Committee identified dilapidated buildings as a cause for concern as they move forward with recovery. Such buildings pose a variety of health and safety problems, weaken neighborhoods and reduce property values.

In most cases, property owners will remove uninhabitable buildings; however, some property owners leave buildings standing when they abandon their property. A common tool for removing unsightly rundown buildings is the enforcement of a local regulation for unsafe or nuisance property. Town officials along with their legal counsel may draft an ordinance that establishes a process by which the town can remove unsafe and abandoned buildings.

Next Steps

- Draft regulations with the assistance of the town attorney.
- Present draft regulations for unsafe and abandoned properties at a public hearing.
- After receiving public input, city council adopts an ordinance putting the regulations into effect.
- A building inspector is appointed to administer the regulations.

ANNEXATION

The committee was also interested in the annexation of the Argo community, located very close to Sipsey. The two communities share common interests and have a number of ties including schools, religious, and family.

Next Steps

- Consult with the Alabama League of Municipalities staff for technical assistance.
- Evaluate opportunities, constraints, expansion of services, and other considerations.

- Work with city attorney to determine proper method of annexation.
- With method of annexation selected, take appropriate steps in accordance with state law.
- Complete annexation process.

Sipsey's council and town attorney can use information provided by the Alabama League of Municipalities and the RPCGB to determine what future regulatory actions they should take to address nuisance abatement and annexation.

Sipsey has exhibited a clear vision of a future with the potential to grow and build a stronger community. This community has demonstrated extraordinary courage and resiliency in responding to this disaster and taking care of "their own." Citizens have a willingness to reach out to their neighbors and this makes Sipsey a strong community.

The information gathered at the community meetings in Sipsey is outlined above. The RPCGB, with the help of the AUUS, is developing a more detailed report that should be available to the Town of Sipsey before the end of 2011.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE MATERIAL

- Information from the Alabama League of Municipalities via RPCGB.
- *Nuisance Abatement Ordinance* from the RPCGB.

FUNDING + CAPACITY BUILDING



GUIDE AND TOOLS

Alabama Resource Guide and Resource Matrices — Federal, State and Regional Resources

The matrix of resources, entitled *Alabama Project Categories — Potential Resources* that supports this document, identifies specific agencies and organizations that the community can approach about potential funding or technical assistance resources to implement community recovery and revitalization projects. The matrix references the *Alabama Resource Guide* (included as a companion disc) that provides an overview of hundreds of federal, state, and regional funding sources, both public and private. In addition, each Project Development Guide (included on a separate companion disc) is paired with a project-specific matrix of resources that are suggested starting points in researching potential funding sources. Unless otherwise noted, these project-specific matrices also refer to funding sources listed in the *Alabama Resource Guide*.

All grant programs have specific eligibility requirements for applicants. Some grant programs fund only 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit organizations, while others fund only governmental units, such as towns or cities. Some grants are available to both types of applicants. Therefore, public-private partnerships are important to maximize funding, capacity building, and other opportunities.

Some grant programs restrict their funding to communities that meet certain eligibility criteria, such as falling within a certain geographic area or possessing certain demographic characteristics like high poverty or unemployment rates. Meeting the specified program criteria could result in a special designation that allows the community to participate in programs and apply for grant funding unavailable to communities that do not meet the program criteria. Some designations specifically target more urban areas for assistance, while others specifically target rural areas. Examples of designations, often referred to as designated areas or zones, that provide funding opportunities include:

- Food deserts in metropolitan areas
- Distressed communities
- Housing or economic development hot zones
- Health professional shortage areas and/or medically underserved areas
- Brownfields

Many specific programs exist to support different types of designated zones or areas. Designations can be part of a successful strategy to secure funding to develop recovery strategies and implement projects that affect a community's economy and vitality.

The census tract matrix, *Census Tract Information for LTCR Communities* that supports this document, shows how the use of designations can help secure funding. This matrix identifies federal grant and financing opportunities, many of which are based on designations that can serve as a core part of the community's grant application, make the project competitive, and facilitate funding. It should be noted that even if a census tract is not designated as eligible for funding or presents a financial resource opportunity, the governing federal agencies do have waiver procedures, especially when it comes to such factors as loss and devastation from disasters.

For more specific information about designations and related funding, contact your regional council of governments or planning commission.

IMPORTANT PARTNERS

Forming alliances and partnerships can increase grant-writing and project implementation success. Partnerships, especially public-private partnerships, can maximize funding, capacity building, and other opportunities. Alliances and partnerships can exist between two communities and/or communities and other organizations. For example, if two or more adjacent communities each submit an application to fund a medical center, they will compete against each other. Conversely, if they submit an application together for one shared facility, they will have a stronger application, less competition, and may even receive more funds. Programs that fund economic development activities often favor a regional approach to overcome challenges. A community and its recovery committee or nonprofit organization may partner with other local, regional, and statewide organizations to build capacity or develop, fund, and implement recovery strategies and projects.

Regional Councils or Planning Commissions

Regional councils are quasi-governmental organizations and another important resource for communities. A regional council or planning commission is a public organization that encompasses a multi-jurisdictional regional community. The governing bodies of councils are primarily composed of local government elected officials and appointed representatives of local communities and state government. The Alabama Association of Regional Planning Councils includes 12 regional planning councils/commissions to support Alabama communities. Five of these councils/commissions serve Alabama's communities that are engaged in the long-term community recovery planning process. The Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham (RPCGB) serves Sipsey and has been actively engaged with the Long-Term Community Recovery planning process.

Through communication, planning, policymaking, coordination, advocacy, grant writing and technical assistance, the commission/council serves the local governments and citizens in the region. These commissions/councils frequently deal with issues and needs that cross city, town, and county boundaries. Also, each region can provide special services as determined by its board of directors. The services and programs offered depend upon local needs and priorities within the region. These needs may exist currently or be based on projected growth, changing lifestyles and demographics, and technological innovations.

Regional councils and planning commissions are an important asset for long-term community recovery work and are well-versed on recovery challenges and needs. They have resources and information that help a community to make decisions about implementation strategies, especially as they pertain to designations, alliances, and grant applications. Additionally, each regional council or planning commission has a comprehensive economic development strategy (CEDS), which offers a detailed view of the opportunities, needs, and challenges within the region to promote and sustain economic growth.

Community members may visit the RPCGB website (www.rpcgb.org) for a full list of the programs and services offered by regional commissions.

501(c)(3) Charitable Nonprofit Organizations

A 501(c)(3) refers to a charitable nonprofit organization that is incorporated in a state and designated by the Internal Revenue Service as a charitable entity. Nonprofits do not pay federal taxes on programs and services related to their charitable mission. Nonprofit missions can include aid to vulnerable populations; construction, erection and/or maintenance of historic buildings, monuments, or works; reducing the burdens of government; community development; youth programs; and other charitable purposes.

Many grant programs offer funding only to 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofits. A community's recovery committee may decide to incorporate as a charitable nonprofit and partner with the local government to strengthen the recovery effort and opportunities. Depending on the recovery goals and future development plans, the community may choose to structure its charitable nonprofit as a certain type of community service or development organization. These types of organizations are described below.

Community Development Corporations

Community Development Corporations (CDCs) are community-established organizations that anchor local capital through residential and commercial development, ranging from affordable housing to shopping centers and businesses.

Community Housing Development Organizations

Community Housing Development Organizations (CHDOs) earn designation through the federal HOME program and serve as a means to finance housing projects. A CHDO generally is defined as a nonprofit, community-based community service organization that develops affordable housing in the low-income community it serves.

Community Development Financial Institutions

Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) earn designation from the U.S. Treasury Department. A CDFI is a private-sector financial institution that focuses on personal lending and business development efforts in local communities. They are primarily funding sources to support small business growth and development. CDFIs can be an important source for the use of New Market Tax Credits to finance economic development efforts.

Economic Development Organizations

Economic Development Organizations serve as the primary sources of grant funds from federal agencies involved in economic development.

Certified Development Corporations

Certified Development Corporations earn their designation from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) and offer any form of SBA loan assistance. Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) are partnerships primarily between the government and colleges to provide educational services for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs.

Housing Resource Centers

Housing Resource Centers (HRCs) are central points for technical assistance and a resource for stimulating new housing construction as well as rehabilitation. HRCs help existing and potential homeowners to locate resources to repair, build, or purchase a home.

A community or committee should explore all options to determine the best vehicle to develop its recovery strategies and projects. It may choose to structure as, or partner with, one of the community development organization types. Alternatively, the community or committee may elect to incorporate as a charitable nonprofit corporation but not structure it specifically as one of these organizations, based on what best meets the needs and goals of the community for the both its recovery and future development.

Agencies, Universities and Associations

State agencies, universities, and associations provide a broad range of financial and other support to communities and organizations of interest to them. They are an excellent resource for capacity building support, technical assistance, studies and projections, and sometimes even funding. The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) is the coordinating agency under the Governor's Office for long-term community

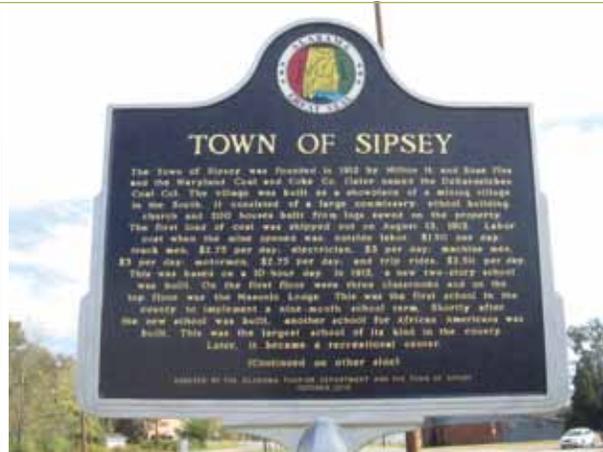
recovery efforts. There are numerous supporting state agencies that assist in long-term community recovery. A list of links to State agency websites is included in Section V of the *Alabama Resource Guide*.

Examples of Other Potential Partners

- Alabama Association of Nonprofits
<http://alabamanonprofits.org>
- Alabama Communities of Excellence
www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org
- Your Town Alabama
www.yourtownalabama.org
- Alabama Home Builders Association
www.hbaa.org
- Local university centers and programs
- Local chambers of commerce
- Local development authorities

This is by no means a comprehensive list, but it does illustrate that numerous agencies and organizations can partner with communities to gain needed support during the recovery process. The regional council or planning commission that serves the region is an excellent resource for cultivating and strengthening relationships with these key partners, both public and private. Typically, the regional council or planning commission has existing relationships with the organizations and agencies that are active in the region and can provide insight and resources to help identify and secure critical support for projects. Assembling a strong team of partners to provide support is essential to holistic recovery.





TOWN OF SIPSEY, ALABAMA

Resolution adopted June 3, 2011

Whereas, the Town of Sipsey, Alabama, and the surrounding communities in Walker County, received major devastation as a result of the tornado that struck our area on April 27, 2011.

Whereas, the impact of the tornado included loss of life in the Town of Sipsey, as well as major losses to its Housing, Business, Educational, Government (Local, State and Federal), Church, and Community facilities.

And, whereas the Town of Sipsey has lost a majority of its traditional tax base and revenue, including revenue necessary to cover operations resulting from the tornado.

Therefore, be it resolved that the Town of Sipsey requests FEMA's Long-Term Community Recovery group and its partner agencies, otherwise known as Emergency Support Function Fourteen (ESF-14), be deployed to fully support the Town of Sipsey in our long term recovery as quickly as possible.

Further be it resolved that, the Town Council of the Town of Sipsey encourages all citizens and staff to participate in the recovery activities coordinated through our process in partnership with the County Officials of Walker County, the State of Alabama, FEMA's Long-Term Community Recovery group and other recovery partners.

