



September 28, 2010

October Surprise Storm cost Erie County \$56M

Staff Reports Tonawanda News

— — The October Surprise Storm of 2006 cost Erie County \$56 million, Comptroller Mark Poloncarz reported Monday.

Within six days of the storm, which stretched from Oct. 12 to 13, county officials estimated the storm's cleanup costs at \$100 million for county employees and contractors, then revised its projection to \$150 million for county expenses.

Between October 2006 and October 2008, when the federal state of emergency declaration expired, the county incurred \$55.9 million in expenses, Poloncarz's report states.

"I believe that it was important to report to the public on the storm expenses and revenues, including noting that no major issues or problems were found from an auditing standpoint," he said.

The county's single largest expense was \$39.6 million for debris contractors, many of whom hired out-of-town subcontractors to clean up tree limbs and other debris the storm left in its wake. Contractors cleared and disposed of nearly 30 million tons of debris, Poloncarz's report states.

Erie County workers piled up \$3 million in overtime costs, split up amongst 928 workers. Fourteen of the top 20 overtime earners were Sheriff's office deputies and corrections officers, who were charged with supervising inmates assigned to work on the storm response, Poloncarz said.

On the revenue side, the county sought \$57.2 million through the Federal Emergency Management Agency and New York State Emergency Management Office. A \$1.95 million claim to the state Emergency Management Office still has not been paid, even though both FEMA and SEMO have approved the payment, the comptroller said.

"Despite the efforts of my office and the Collins administration," Poloncarz said, referring to County Executive Chris Collins, "the state has still not released the final reimbursement from the storm, potentially due to the state's 2010 cash flow and budgetary issues."

The severe lake effect storm covered the region with heavy snow and ice, snapping tree limbs and damaging thousands of power lines across the county, but particularly in Buffalo and the towns of Tonawanda, Amherst, Cheektowaga and Clarence. Some parts of Erie County

received two feet of snow in a 12-hour period. More than 400,000 people were without power, and tens of thousands of trees were destroyed.

Many of the hardest hit communities are continuing their efforts to replace a large portion of the trees that were lost during the storm.

The comptroller's report did criticize the County Legislature for giving in to then-County Executive Joel Giambra's request to allow cash overtime to county employees who worked extra hours because of the storm. The resolution gave employees who would not otherwise be eligible for cash overtime the opportunity to collect such a benefit during a state of emergency. According to the comptroller's report, 56 managerial-confidential employees received cash overtime because of the legislature's passage of that resolution.

"We believe that the broad authority the legislature gave to the County Executive for awarding cash overtime in emergency situations is unnecessary," the comptroller's report says. Poloncarz is calling on the county legislature to rescind the resolution and instead review cash payments for overtime for managerial-confidential workers on a case by case basis.

Tonawanda News 435 River Road North Tonawanda, NY 14120