

The March 2010 Floods:

Who Were the Winners?



In one of the marvels of modern economics, when a disaster strikes a country, that country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) frequently increases. Though many people may have lost their lives or their homes, there are economic gains derived from the stimulus of rebuilding a community or even a city. Previously locked up recovery money suddenly flows, and temporary jobs are created for skilled and unskilled workers previously under- or unemployed.

Given the paradoxical economic boost that can come with disasters, this report looks at the provocative question: did anyone—individuals, communities, businesses, and the general state economy—benefit from the March 2010 floods? Of businesses, were those who worked the clean-up local, or from out of state? Were there any benefits for residents and communities who were directly affected by the floods? Were any politicians' profile enhanced by the way they responded to the floods?

Drawing from interviews, articles, and state economic reports, this report begins by searching for economic gains

in Rhode Island after the March 2010 floods, moves to discuss whether the businesses that benefited were local or from outside the state, explores how the flood positively affected communities, and ends by looking at whether the floods had a lasting political impact, as seen during the November 2010 elections. We begin with the economy.

Economic gains

Rhode Island's economy was expected to just begin recovering from "The Great Recession" of 2008-2009 when the flood hit in late March 2010. While most people believed the flooding devastated the local economy, we found some aspects of the state and local economy actually gained from this disaster. To evaluate the negative and positive impacts of the flooding on the Rhode Island economy in both short and longer terms, we looked at two indicators—changes in the labor market and funds from the Federal government.



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In terms of changes in the labor market, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, the seasonally adjusted state unemployment rate fell from 12.6% in March to 12.5% in April. However, it is impossible to say if the decrease is due to the impact of flood, as unemployment declined by the same rate from February to March, as indicated by Figure 1.¹

Because seasonally adjusted unemployment does not reflect the actual current data, and because this graph shows a broad picture of unemployment in the state as a whole, we also used data not seasonally adjusted (“unadjusted”) in order to make a short-term comparison between monthly unemployment rates in the five cities and towns most affected by the flood: Richmond, Hopkinton, Warwick, West Warwick, and East Greenwich.² Additionally, it should be noted that we analyzed labor statistics from March through May 2010 only, as this time-frame covers the flooding period and the beginning of flood recovery.

Despite the fact that the extent to which these five cities were affected by the flooding varies, the trends in the unemployment rates of all five cities indicate that temporary, weather-induced layoffs increased the unemployment rate immediately after the flooding. However, during the recovery period between April and May, unemployment dropped to the pre-flooding level or even lower. This indicated that the labor market, in general, gained from the floods in the short run after the flooding.

In addition to regional differences, we also looked at unemployment in various industrial and business sectors as well, in order to better understand where job opportuni-

Figure 1: Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate of Rhode Island (2010)

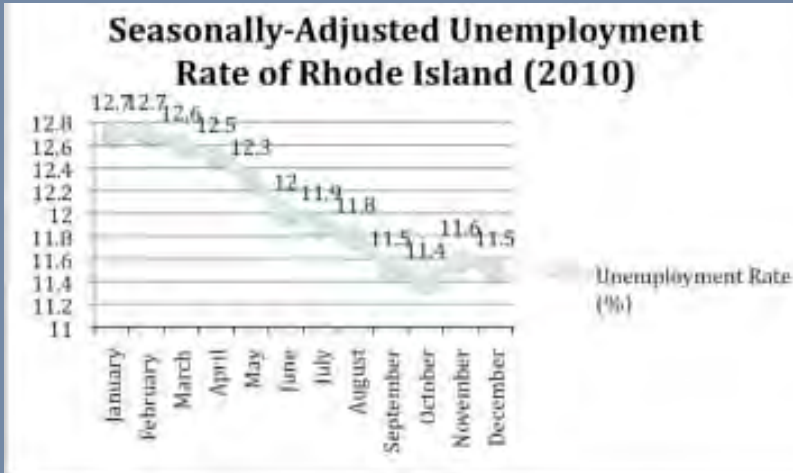


Figure 2: Unadjusted Unemployment Rate of 5 Cities (2010)



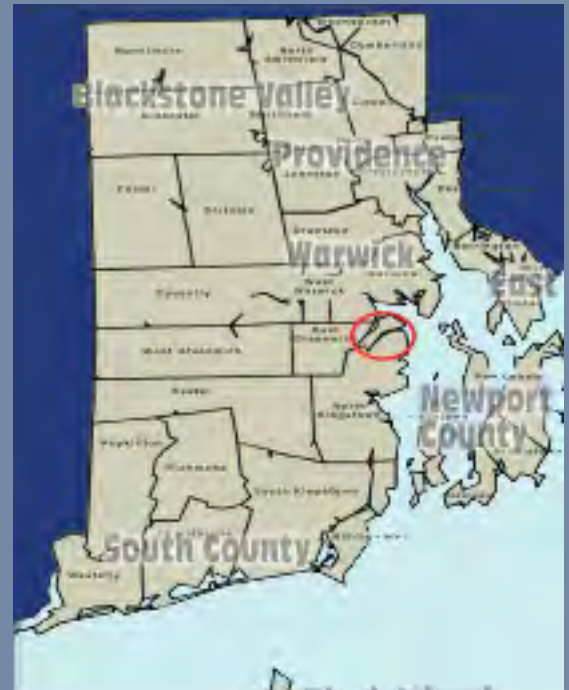
Table 1: Net Job Changes in Rhode Island by Sector

Note: Only sectors with a change over 1000 thousand between March and April are included in this comparison.

Sector	Jobs Created (+)/Lost(-) in April from March (in thousands)	Jobs Created (+)/Lost(-) in May from April (in thousands)
Accommodations & Food Services	-1,800	400
Retail Trade	-1,100	0
Art, Entertainment & Recreation	-1,100	-100
Manufacturing and Construction	-700	-600
Professional and Business Services	1,800	-1,200

Figure 3:

The area indicated by the red circle is also part of the Warwick municipality but is physically separated from the rest of Warwick by East Greenwich



ties were created. We obtained these data from the Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training—which utilizes Rhode Islanders’ payroll and tax information—for the months of April through May; using these data, we looked at job gains and losses in different sectors (Table 1).

Table 1 indicates that although most sectors experienced tremendous job losses during the flooding, there were jobs created in two sectors: Construction and Professional Services, both during and after the flooding: . This was likely because landscaping, temporary help, waste management, and other services were in high demand due to the flood³—demand which came from both residents and city and municipal departments. For example, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management released a statement to households in flooded areas advising that “extreme care should be taken in properly disposing of household hazardous waste items that may have been damaged or impacted by flood waters.”⁴ Employment within construction picked up after the flooding, as indicated by the chart above, when rebuilding projects largely increased. For example, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation said it awarded contracts worth \$14 million, with \$6.7 million remaining as of November 2010.⁵ Large employment gains were also reported in the Accommodation & Food Services sector due in part to re-opening of restaurants and business growth in hotels that accommodated relocated residents from areas affected by the floods.⁶ Therefore, workers working in these sectors experienced substantial gains from the floods, even as those in some other sectors suffered.

Aside from job creation in the Manufacturing & Construction, Accommodation & Food Services, and Professional & Business sectors, another positive effect the March flooding brought to the Rhode Island economy was the federal funding that the State received, which has since been allocated to build better infrastructures. Unlike the funding used by municipalities to rebuild damaged houses and buildings in local communities as a compensation for citizens’ losses from the floods (see “FEMA Assistance with Rhode Island” in Report 4 Appendix), the funding for infrastructure improvements yields new long-term opportunity to the State economy. According to Leonard Lardaro, an economist and professor at the University of Rhode Island, the improved infrastructures would help the State build its capacity for economic growth by creating a better business and living environment.⁷

Andres Carbacho-Burgos, an economist with Moody’s Economy.com who tracks Rhode Island and believes these federal funds “might boost the pace of recovery,” [8] shared a perspective similar to that of Lardaro with Providence Business News: “Starting in the fourth [fiscal] quarter Rhode Island will make up at least part of the lost ground as far as income and employment losses” because “by that point, the state will be getting federal and other funding for rebuilding, which will boost construction employment. That could be enough to adjust the state’s economic growth forecast ‘slightly upward.’”⁹ As of January 2011, Rhode Island had received more than \$135 million in federal funding to help the state recover from the floods; the state government invested this money in projects such as building new water and sewer systems that will improve local water quality and reduce costs.¹⁰ Additionally, the U.S. Economic Development Administration announced in February 2011 that it was making up to \$10.6 million in federal funding available to Rhode Island for flood recovery.¹¹ With federal funds flowing into Rhode Island for disaster relief and the new infrastructures being established, Rhode Island’s economic growth rate will likely increase and have a better business environment—one that creates advantages for the economy to pick up in the long run.¹²

Gains By Local and Out-of-State Businesses

There were a number of businesses and other parties who benefited from the floods, especially in terms of levels of patronage and sales. These beneficiaries included local hotels, home improvement and hardware stores, as well as clean-up and remediation companies.

During the floods, many residents were displaced and had to be relocated because of the damages to their homes and the risks of remaining in their homes during the flooding. As a result, these residents were forced to locate shelter elsewhere, especially in local hotels, some of which were nearly at 100% capacity because of displaced residents.¹³ In order to help out these displaced residents, many Rhode Island hotels reported that they offered lower rates, including several in Warwick, Providence, Newport, and Middletown.¹⁴ Katherine Fetherline, a sales associate at the Providence Biltmore, stated that the hotel was not structurally affected by the floods, nor did they see as large an upswing in local guests as other Warwick hotels did dur-



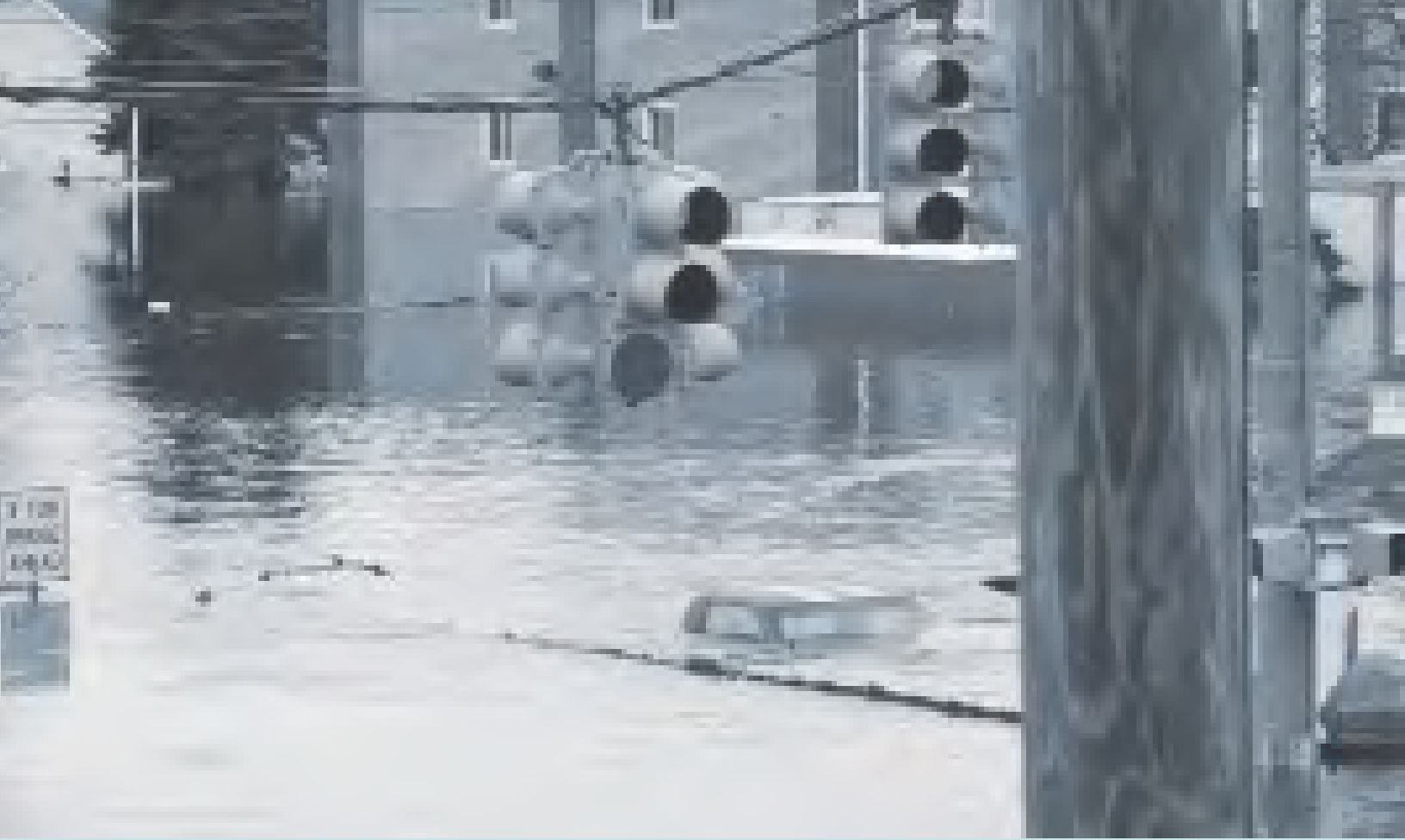
ing the flooding.¹⁵ In contrast, at another hotel, the Spring Hill Suites in West Warwick, not only was there an influx in guests, but every room was completely filled.

Although a number of local hotels saw an increase in business, not all of these hotels' experiences during the floods were positive. According to a receptionist at the Extended Stay America Hotel in Warwick, the hotel was forced to evacuate because of the flooding. This was primarily due to road closures in the area and a "sewage problem." When the hotel reopened, many of the guests were mostly emergency response workers from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). However, there were several residents in the area who also stayed at the hotel.¹⁶

Aside from hotels, hardware and home improvement stores also benefited significantly from the floods. Sump pump and surface pump sales spiked in the days directly following the flooding.¹⁷ The day after the initial flooding hundreds of Rhode Island residents poured into hardware stores, many purchased either sump pumps or surface

pumps.¹⁸ Colby Jenkins, a student at Brown University, said in an e-mail to the Brown Daily Herald that on the first day of the storm at 7 a.m., he was able to purchase the last pump in his local Home Depot but there were no more vacuums there; he also commented, "every other store in the area was out of pumps, forcing a large number of people to just hope that the damage wouldn't be too severe."¹⁹

In the weeks that followed, many other cleanup and repair supplies were needed. Steve Durand, a manager of a local Providence Home Depot, noted that many customers purchased a variety of items (e.g., rubber gloves, goggles, and N-95 face masks), some of which he believed they did not need.²⁰ Similarly, Andre Thomas, a manager at a Lowe's in Warwick stated that it was a trying time for everyone, affecting both local residents and employees. Thomas stated that they ordered additional merchandise in anticipation of a large volume of customers seeking supplies to clean and repair their homes. The items purchased during this time included sump pumps, surface pumps, mops, buckets, and



sponges. Additionally, a great deal of hydraulic cement was sold to those hoping to address the poor foundations of their homes. Thomas estimated that approximately 85% of customers knew exactly what to get, whereas 15% “had no clue.” Both Thomas’ and Durand’s statements indicate that the stores they oversee and other local home improvement stores may have profited significantly from sales of items purchased by flood victims.

Of the business that benefited from the floods, clean-up and remediation businesses are likely at the top of the list. Two major clean-up and remediation companies that participated in the post-flooding clean-up were Service-Master Clean and Servpro, both of which are franchises with offices throughout the nation, including Rhode Island.²¹ An article by the Providence Journal reported that Servpro had approximately 1,600 calls from Rhode Island Residents in early April—not including additional calls that continued to come in—and that the 13 Servpro employees in Rhode Island averaged over 53 hours of overtime each in one week. According to Harold Katofsky, the owner of a

Servpro franchise in Pennsylvania quoted in the Providence Journal, the cost of drying and cleaning a finished basement of 700 square feet, including removing “waterlogged wall and flooring material” was approximately \$3,000.²² With the number of calls they received and other necessary tasks, such as providing field estimates of damages, Servpro likely profited substantially from the March floods.

Community Gains

Although the March floods brought immense grief and frustration to Rhode Island residents in addition to severely damaged property, the impacts on the social infrastructure of the Rhode Island community appear to have been far less detrimental. In fact, the floods strengthened many ties within the community by bringing together those directly affected. Most notably, after the floods, residents of Perkins Avenue in Cranston—one of the hardest-hit areas in Rhode Island—came together in order to “cope with the



aftermath of the disaster” and develop a plan to present to the federal government in hopes of having their homes bought out.²³

Stories of neighborly friendship continued through and after the floods. According to a report by the Cranston Herald, “A Warwick resident who owns property that was flooded out in Cranston, [Brian] Dupont says he never would have met so many people if not for the disaster. That is a positive outcome to the devastating floods.”²⁴ Phone interviews with Patricia St. Amant, Director of the Warwick Buttonwoods Community Center, and Peter Ethier, co-owner of the West Warwick Civic Center—a facility declared as a shelter for Cranston, Warwick, West Warwick, and Providence residents during the flooding—attests to these statements. Ethier highlighted the altruism displayed by residents who visited the shelter in order to drop off donations of clothing to victims of the flooding. Additionally, according to Amant, church groups and neighbors worked together to shovel mud, clean up debris, and have spaghetti dinners in order to build morale. In the

opinion of Billie Rossi, a resident of Perkins Avenue in Cranston, neighbors helped her not only daily but also “more than FEMA did.”²⁵

Flood damage and emergency relocation also prompted some local businesses to visit shelters and drop off meals, water, and amenities such as toothbrushes and socks. Some businesses even brought gift cards for residents as small reimbursements for flood losses.²⁶

In addition to bringing residents together, in some areas, the floods also significantly increased public faith and trust in the local government and city workers, such as firemen and police officers. One Cranston resident in particular, Antonio Barone expressed his opinions of the emergency response workers in response to a blog post on the Providence Journal 7 to 7 News Blog: “This city owes the heroes [sic] who suit up everyday for work not knowing what risks may come before them. Words cannot describe how grateful I am to have a Mayor and everyone working down the chain of command below him.”²⁷ Likewise, Rossi stated that



Mayor Allan Fung was “unbelievable,” as he gave out his personal phone number and visited not only Rossi’s home but also the homes of other residents of Perkins Avenue.²⁸ Amant voiced similar sentiments, stating that the stress caused by the floods was alleviated thanks to Warwick city departments and Mayor Scott Avedisian, whom she cited as the “key to success” in coping with the damages caused by the floods in Warwick.²⁹

Aside from instigating greater trust in city workers and the local government, the floods also helped to improve collaborative efforts both within and between communities. During an informal discussion and conversation with Avedisian, he revealed that city and municipal government agencies are “working much closer than ever before.” (See Report 3)³⁰ Relationships between communities are now much stronger, largely due to stress-induced collaboration during the floods: Warwick shared police cars with Cranston since a number of Cranston’s police cars were lost due to flood damage, and the local East Greenwich government volunteered to take responsibility over the area of

Warwick that is physically separate from the rest of the city (Figure 3). Furthermore, there now exists coordinated response between Warwick’s police and fire departments, which Avedisian stated is “not the norm.”

Overall, the March 2010 floods have had a number of significant effects on the Rhode Island community—both negative and positive. These effects have left a lasting impression upon the Rhode Island community because as Ethier stated, “Everybody came together, got stronger, and did what they had to do.” This lasting impression can strengthen the community, preparing them for future hardship.



Political Gains

In line with the provocative nature of this study, we asked another tough question: Did anyone benefit politically from the March floods? With the primaries and November gubernatorial, national and local elections arriving relatively soon after the rains and floods struck Rhode Island, politicians' response to the floods may have played a role in determining the outcome of the fall races. Surely, it seemed, the image of the floods would be fresh in the minds of voters, making it an important aspect of the campaigns and a clear factor in constituents' decision at the ballot boxes. If only the answer were that simple.

In order to understand whether there was indeed a lasting political impact from the floods, we decided to explore the political effect of the floods on a couple of specific politicians and local governments. For Mayors Allan Fung and Scott Avedisian, from Cranston and Warwick, respectively, we examined how the media attention affected their local and national profile, and asked whether the experience

with a national disaster has encouraged them to seek higher political office. For local governments, we looked at the election results of Warwick's City Council, hoping they would provide an indicator to the public sentiment regarding these politicians' response to the floods.

Avedisian stepped into a small office with large shoes to fill. Succeeding Lincoln Chafee, who went straight from the Mayor's office to Washington as Rhode Island's Senator, Avedisian has been very successful, being re-elected six times. The floods and the national media that they brought provided two completely different challenges. Instantaneously, Avedisian was dealing directly with a large branch of the federal government in FEMA.³¹ Soon after, he was thrust into national media prominence with television interviews on The Weather Channel and two nightly news programs, as well as with a printed interview in USA Today.³² Recently, rumors have begun to spread that Avedisian will seek the nomination for Rhode Island's senate seat in the next election, seeking to unseat incumbent Senator Sheldon Whitehouse.³³ Though these rumors re-



main unconfirmed, as Avedisian has declined to comment, there are indications of a bump in popularity as Avedisian responded to the floods and appeared in the national media.³⁴

Similarly, Fung, who led Cranston through the floods, received a significant amount of media attention. For instance, Fung appeared on CBS's "The Early Show" after the rain had come to an end.³⁵ While much of the news he had to report was worrisome, Fung, like Avedisian, skillfully used the media attention to disseminate his recommendations for Cranston citizens.

With regard to the local politicians, Carol Caruso, an aide to Avedisian, explained that all of the incumbent members of the Warwick city council were re-elected, save one.³⁶ While the relationship between Warwick's response to the floods and following recovery on the one hand and the electoral success of Warwick's city council members on the other appear strongly correlated, it is impossible to prove

the relationship. Nevertheless, Warwick's response to and recovery from the floods could not have hurt the city council members' chances at re-election. The same goes for the Mayors in their potential runs for higher offices.

Conclusion

In approaching this study, we hypothesized that several benefits would arise from the floods in the economic, community and political spheres. We surmised that, as in the case of other disasters, the local and statewide economies would experience an increase due to the recovery and clean up from the floods. Additionally, we speculated that the trials of the floods would afford communities an opportunity to come together and grow stronger. Finally, we presumed that certain politicians' effective manner of responding to the floods would help them in their bids for reelection or higher office.



In many ways, however, the extent of the benefits from the floods was not as comprehensive as we had imagined. The local economy only experienced observable gains in particular sectors over a brief time period following the floods, and the effects of the floods on the state economy in the long run have been inconclusive. Though there is a strong correlation between the continued success of the politicians involved with the floods and their successful response to and recovery from the floods, there is no way to prove that this is a causal relationship.

Nevertheless, the one area that clearly benefited from the floods was on the community level, as people in some cases grew closer in supporting one another and dealing with the floods together. Perhaps what our findings suggest most strongly is that an aspect of emergency preparedness should include being ready to respond to disasters on the economic level, by addressing unemployment that might result. Regardless, we were relieved to find that the benefits gained from the floods were not obtained by taking advantage of its victims.

“Everybody came together, got stronger, and did what they had to do.” -Peter Ethier



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