

Drawing on hope

Photographs of property damage after the two tornadoes that passed through Lake County on February 2, 2007.



On Feb. 2 at approximately 3:25 a.m., a tornado with 155 mph winds touched down near the Town of Lady Lake. About 15 minutes later, a second tornado with 165 mph winds slammed the Lake Mack community. Tragically, the County's most devastating disaster on record caused 21 fatalities. In addition, the two twisters destroyed 185 structures and damaged another 285 structures for more than \$26 million in property damage.

The County and its partners in the disaster quickly responded, conducting search and rescue operations and setting up the Lake County Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The EOC, which serves as a central location for the coordination and collaboration of emergency response, remained activated around the clock for two straight weeks. The EOC did not fully deactivate until March 2 when recovery operations were moved to the Emergency Management Division's office.

While the Department of Public Safety led the disaster response, numerous other County departments assisted with the operation. Environmental Services and Public Works played a key role in the recovery effort as debris collection operations began 36 hours

after the storms hit. At the beginning of April, the County management team, monitoring consultant and debris collection contractor ended the operation with more than 175,000 cubic yards of debris processed.

The efforts of the Department of Community Services were also paramount in the recovery process. The County's volunteer program, VolunterLAKE, established the nation's first volunteer reception center. Titled "Operation Groundhog Heroes," commemorating the tornado strikes on Feb. 2, the center helped coordinate volunteer efforts to assist with home repairs and debris clean up on private property. The effort was staged at a base camp in Leesburg and the operation eventually coordinated more than 700 volunteers from all over the country.

The Housing & Community Development Division quickly joined in the recovery efforts with funding to provide down payment assistance for mobile home owners and repair work to homes, such as installation of new water wells and septic systems. The Division requested and received from the State \$5 million to implement a repair and home

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replacement program in both impacted areas over the next two years for homeowners who meet the requirements of the program.

Another department involved in the disaster recovery from the onset was Growth Management. More than 75 employees from the Department conducted inspections of home repairs, expedited permitting for storm-damaged properties and managed the planning section of the EOC.

Lake County thanks the many partners that came to its aid for response and recovery efforts. The quick and decisive actions of the Florida Division of Emergency Management and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) helped in meeting the needs of Lake County citizens. Three disaster recovery centers, where residents could apply for federal disaster assistance, were in service within 60 hours of the event. Within eight days, the first FEMA trailer was in place for a family that lost their home. The County is also grateful for the efforts of the many local governments and volunteer agencies that sent assistance. Without their help, finding the path to recovery would have been a far greater task.