Loss of life, property

Sandy wallops the Northeast



Rebuilders reeling from East Coast storms

By Traci Matt
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You've seen the statistics: more than 100 killed in the U.S.; 8.5 million without power; highest storm surges ever recorded in the Northeast; 90 mph winds on Long Island; a foot of rain in Maryland; and 34 inches of snow in Tennessee.

Hurricane Sandy pulled no punches when she came ashore on October 29.

Tony Mendola, owner of JAMCO Starters & Alternators on Long Island, was closed for a whole week due to power outages, but grateful his loss was "only financial."

"I can't complain," he said. "So many will never get to go home. It was bad. I heard one guy drowned while pumping water out of his basement."

Mendola's home had some water damage, but his nearby rental properties were flooded with over a foot of water in the basements. He is working early mornings and late nights to replace floors, walls, furnaces and appliances—all while hosting tenants in his home for the duration of the repairs.

JAMCO is located about one mile from the shore and although his shop did not sustain any damage, the building next door lost its roof. One big problem Mendola sees now for his community is the loss of protective dunes which were destroyed by the storm surge.

"The high tide came up so high, well, higher than I've ever seen it. Those dunes that protected homes are just gone," he said.

To add insult to injury, a nor'easter dubbed Athena by meteorologists at The Weather Channel blew in a week later. Athena caused 60,000 homes that had just had power restored to be plunged into cold darkness again, and stirred up the rubble left by Sandy.

After the second storm passed, Mendola said people began returning to the coast to check on the condition of their second homes. He hopes that increase in traffic will begin to make up for almost two weeks of downtime.

"With the gas shortage the roads have been pretty bare. I've seen a drop in retail customers. I have seen wood chipper and stump grinder starters, things like that, and equipment sales have increased a little bit, but not enough to make up for a loss of a week's business," he said.

The gas shortage found some relief in New York and New Jersey with rationing based on the last digit of license plate numbers—odd filling up on odd calendar days, even on even days. Mendola said that has "started to lighten up" the long lines.

In hindsight, Mendola said he wishes he had invested in a generator for the shop so he could at least have lights and a way to print invoices.

"I do have a better idea where my old catalogs are," he joked. "I even had to call J & N and have them look something up for me. Everybody is helping each other out."

Farther to the west of JAMCO on Long Island, Abel Mercado of IAT said they have been a bit more challenged by Sandy and Athena. Although they were only closed one full day, IAT endured 15 days without Internet or phone service. Even cell phone service has been sporadic.

"It was nuts," he said. "We lost a good amount of business from phone calls. We had to have calls forwarded to cell phones. We lost service there but by Wednesday or Thursday we started getting regular phone calls. One person basically took messages and handed out tasks. For Internet someone brought in a data stick so we had one computer to work with."

Even getting into work was tricky as the utility poles in front of IAT were overloaded and catching on fire during the days following Sandy. Mercado was also without power at home for 11 days and had to move in with a family member. Fortunately there was no damage to IAT or to Mercado's home.

He did experience a "horrible" first week of fuel shortages, waiting in line one time for two and a half hours. He said he was relieved to be allowed to fill his tank completely, as some stations were rationing at that point.

Since the phones have been back in service, IAT has seen an uptick in business, but "nowhere near" what they are expecting in the weeks to come.

"There was so much flooding that it's not only going to be alternators and starters that we see, but people lost complete vehicles. I guess people living on upper floors thought they would be OK, but didn't consider their cars parked on the street," he said. "My brother's car was completely submerged."

Even with the loss of business and the unbelievable inconvenience, Mercado has kept a positive frame of mind.

"This was way worse than Irene. A lot of people had the mentality that it would be like that, but it was more of a direct hit. A lot of people had their guard down. But for the area that it hit and the amount of people here, it could have been a lot worse. We are back running almost 100 percent and our main focus is just keeping the business running. I'm not going to get

Checking in

Here are some post-Sandy reports from rebuilders on the East Coast:

"Everything at my location is fine…Windy and rain. After the eye got there it just seemed like everything was over. People along the ocean got hit pretty bad by the tides and the strong wind."—Anthony Bianchino, Lou Bianchino & Sons, Ocean View, N.J.

"We are OK with not much trouble. The shop is at the bottom with two ridges on both sides of us so the wind goes over the top. Also we are northwest of Baltimore and near Gettysburg so the storm lost its punch when it got to us."—Larry Robinson, Robinson Electrical Automotive, Westminster, Md.

"We were basically spared. Had a few power outages, some trees and wind, little rain. I see a rush of support on the road and requests for blood and such. It will be a long haul if ever back to normal in some downstate Pennsylvania and New Jersey areas."—Raymond VanDervort, VanDervort Repair and Rebuild, Apalachin, N.Y.

"We had no problems here in our area. Washington, D.C. has so much 'hot air' from Congress and the White House that we are insulated from storms like that." — Bill Gager, Automotive Parts Remanufacturers Association, Chantilly, Va.

"I was in Las Vegas and could not get a flight home until Wednesday but all is well."— Dan Smith, Arrowhead Electrical Products, East Coast Operations

"Thank God everything here in Elizabeth is OK, no damage. Feel sorry for our members on Long Island and Jersey Shore." — Francesco Zeppieri, Zepali, Elizabeth, N.J.

"The city closed traffic for one day so we had to close, but we are fine."—Bruce Duncan, Best Battery Company, Baltimore, Md.

"We had a little bit of rain and wind. Business just completely died because when storms come like that everybody's concentrating on pulling the boats. We lost three to four weeks of year-end business."—Walter Beacham, Beacham Marine, Pasedena, Md.

any more gray hairs over this," he said.

Thomas Laessig, owner of S.T.M. Heavy Duty Electric in Zionsville, Pa., said they prepared pretty well for Sandy and "weathered the storm OK.

"We did things like secure our drums and we secured anything light, like cardboard. We lost one panel of the building but that's all."

After working a short day on the Monday that Sandy hit, they were closed with no utilities at all Tuesday and Wednesday, and struggled to reopen on Thursday.

"We slowly came back up to speed. The problem was employees didn't know whether to come in our not. Cell phone service came back immediately after the storm, but cell tower battery backups failed on Tuesday and all of a sudden there was no communication. Cell service was not normal until the end of the week. That was really a first. Landlines come and go, but cell service was an interesting lack of infrastructure," said Laessig.

During the time with no power they paid employees but had no revenue, which compounded the economic hit. In hindsight he wishes he had planned some projects in advance, like online work for employees who had electricity at home, or even catching up on unwinding projects.

"We just ramped up by Friday and have been working like crazy," he said.

One fortunate thing for S.T.M.'s community was that the local convenience store rented a "humongous" generator to keep pumps open.

"Cars were literally parked all through their lot and lined up down the block," he said.

His home was not damaged, although they lost some "huge oaks" and had a lot of cleanup to do.

"The good thing is that the vast majority of the leaves had turned and fallen so that helped," he said.

Ken Plourde, owner of Guy's Electric Service in South Windsor, Conn., is located 60 miles inland and "dodged a bullet" with Sandy, with high winds but no loss of power. He said last year's October storms cleared a lot of the trees and helped them avoid another weeklong loss of power and phone service.

However, Athena dumped half a foot of snow on them, which actually created a flurry of business for Guy's.

"We've been keeping pretty busy. The snowplow guys were still in the landscape and cleanup mode for fall. Everything was still put away. We have had a lot of business helping them out with electric snowplow problems and things like that," he said. "Our business has always been weather-related. Very hot weather or very cold weather is good for our business—as long as we can stay open."

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The view from rebuilder Tony Mendola's front door after Sandy blew ashore last month.