

AFTER THE STORM PASSED BY

By William F. Eckman

INTRODUCTION

On a pleasant Sunday evening, April 28, 2002, the Town of La Plata experienced what was initially classified as an F5 tornado on the Fujita scale, later changed to F4. There was really very little warning. Weather forecasters announced a tornado watch, but predicted the storm would go north of La Plata, much closer to the Waldorf Town Center than La Plata. When it hit, the tornado went through the center of La Plata's business district and touched some residential developments. It left a 400 yard swath of nearly total destruction from one end of Town to the other. Many of the buildings that had been standing for a hundred years or more were gone. Long time residents couldn't even recognize the downtown area where they had done their shopping, gone to the post office, visited the doctors and dentists that had served them most of their lives and conducted other business. Ten years later, the Town has fully recovered from the damage and taken advantage of the opportunity to make some of the changes that the Town's long range vision plan recommended. Population growth has continued unabated and most of the residents of the Town agree that La Plata is a better place to live now than it was before the tornado hit.

Although he retired from the position seven years ago, the author of this document was the Mayor at the time the tornado hit and had served in that office since 1983. While most of this document reports what happened as he remembers it and the rebuilding of the Town since then, his wife has shared her experiences and how it affected her life as well on page 40.

With the emphasis on Homeland Security at the present time and the need for emergency planning, it seems appropriate to look back on all that happened during that time and what worked best in recovering from this natural disaster from the standpoint of those who actually lived through it.

The one outstanding thing that made the recovery possible was all the help the Town received. Twenty Seven different jurisdictions sent help in the form of vehicles, heavy equipment and the personnel to operate them. In particular, the cities of Washington D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland came through big time. D.C had people on the scene in La Plata by Tuesday and their delegation eventually included nearly 150 people. They sent a mobile command post and one of their emergency management supervisors to help coordinate the cleanup. Their delegation even included a battalion chief from the Fire Department to serve as safety officer. Baltimore sent 17 trucks, several pieces of heavy equipment and 35 men to operate them. The Governor and many of the state agencies participated in the recovery. They were all there when they were needed and they continued to stay with us during the rebuilding of the Town. During the second week when the major cleanup took place, there were 300 pieces of equipment and 600 workers in Town including 25% of the total resources of the Maryland State Highway Administration.

This incident was a graphic example of the fact that it is possible to make the best of what started out as a natural disaster and use it as a spring board to accomplish the vision the Town had for its future. As someone said, this was an excellent example of urban renewal without the cost of demolition.

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1. INTRODUCTION TO LA PLATA

The Town of La Plata is located in Southern Maryland approximately 35 miles south of the nation's capital in Washington, D.C. as illustrated in Figure 1-1. Charles County was created in 1658 and Port Tobacco was the County seat at that time. Prior to the Civil War, Southern Maryland had an agricultural economy and depended heavily on slaves to produce tobacco and other crops. In 1850, there were more slaves in Charles County than free whites. There were very few roads at that time and commerce was centered on the Potomac and Patuxent rivers. Port Tobacco was a sea port used by ocean going vessels and was the economic engine that supported Charles County and the people that lived there.

Probably due primarily to poor farming practices, silt began to accumulate in the Port Tobacco River and by 1890, the closest docks were quite some distance from the center of the Town. A major change occurred in the economy and the way of life in Charles County when the railroad was built.

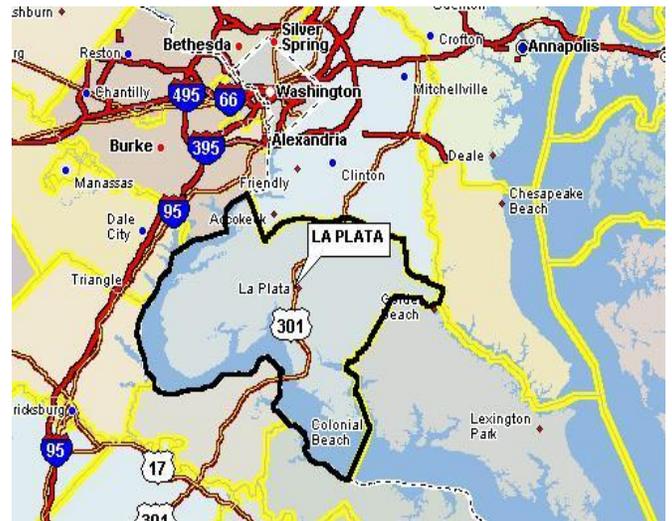
During the 19th century, the economy of our country and even the entire world changed. As the railroad network expanded nationwide, new markets were created and many areas prospered. On May 6, 1853, the governor of Maryland approved a charter that authorized construction of a railroad from some suitable point in or near the city of Baltimore, and through or near Upper Marlboro and Port Tobacco to the Potomac River. The charter also included the right to construct branches not to exceed 20 miles in length. The Civil War delayed the construction of that railroad, the Baltimore and Potomac or B&P, for a number of years.

It was primarily a lack of funding that kept it from being built. Finally, in 1867 the Pennsylvania Railroad became involved and provided the financial aid the

proposed railroad needed for construction to begin. The railroad might never have been built if not for the provision in its charter that gave

it permission to build branches up to 20 miles in length. This enabled the Pennsylvania Railroad to build a spur from Bowie to Washington D.C. and compete with the Baltimore and Ohio railroad for the lucrative traffic between Baltimore and Washington. Whatever the motivation, trains began to run between Bowie and Popes Creek on January 1, 1873.

Figure 1-1 Charles County



There were seven stations in Charles County on the new railroad line, but La Plata Station quickly became the most active. One reason for this was the fact that it was located along the Port Tobacco-Chapman town road and was within an hour's walk of the County Seat in Port Tobacco. Several businesses were established around the new La Plata railroad station and the center of commerce began to shift eastward from Port Tobacco to the community that was developing around La Plata Station. By 1888, the Town had grown to the point that it became an incorporated municipality with Town Commissioners elected to guide it as it continued to grow. At the time it was

incorporated, the Town Limits included 296 acres. Since then, there have been a number of annexations. By 2002, the Town had grown to almost 4,800 acres and had a population of more than 8,000 when the tornado went through.

During the period from 1875 to 1895, many of the business people in Port Tobacco moved to La Plata to take advantage of the opportunities the railroad brought with it. A movement began to move the courthouse to La Plata. A bill was introduced in the Maryland State legislature in 1892 to require the voters of Charles County to vote on the issue of whether to move the county seat. The voters at that time rejected the move and that seemed to settle the issue. A few months later, a mysterious fire destroyed the courthouse in Port Tobacco and the issue was re-opened. Fortunately, all of the records were saved from the fire, and two years later the Maryland Assembly made the decision to move the courthouse and the county seat to La Plata.

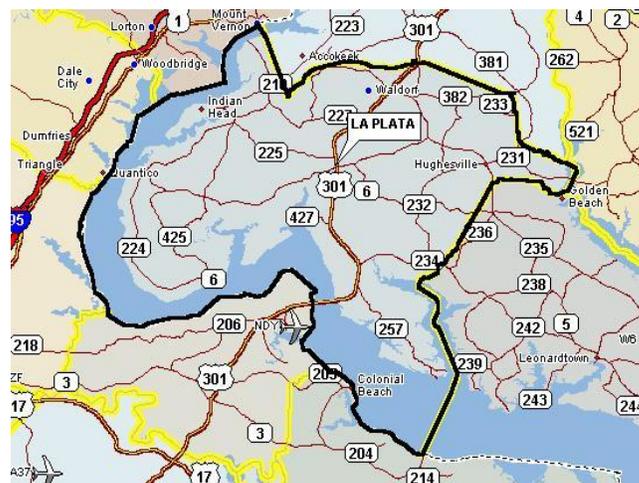
La Plata soon became the center of commerce for all of Charles County and the railroad was its connection to Baltimore and from there to the rest of the world. During the early 20th century, the automobile began to supplant the railroad as the primary means of transportation in Southern Maryland. Figure 1-2 shows that the Town of La Plata became the hub of that system as well. In addition to the railroad, all major roads led to La Plata. The next major change took place when the Harry Nice Bridge was built across the Potomac River. Even as the road network developed, the County was still located on a peninsula surrounded by the Potomac and Patuxent Rivers and remained isolated to a large extent. The new bridge, built in 1940, opened up Charles County not only to Virginia, but with the development of the interstate highway system, took the place of the railroad as the primary means of transportation.

La Plata played a vital role as the County Seat as the population grew and Charles County

progressed from a primarily rural character toward a more urban environment. Not only did the rest of the County depend on La Plata for court related functions, but the first public high school was built there. The first hospital in Charles County was built in La Plata and several of the major religions were represented by church buildings. When slot machines were introduced into Southern Maryland, many people from other areas of the country took advantage of the opportunity to gamble. Crain Highway became lined with restaurants and motels from the Potomac River to the Prince George County line. The Town of La Plata was at the center of this activity and tourism became an important part of Charles County's economy.

Another big change took place in 1966 with the construction of St. Charles in northern Charles County. The Federal Government made a number

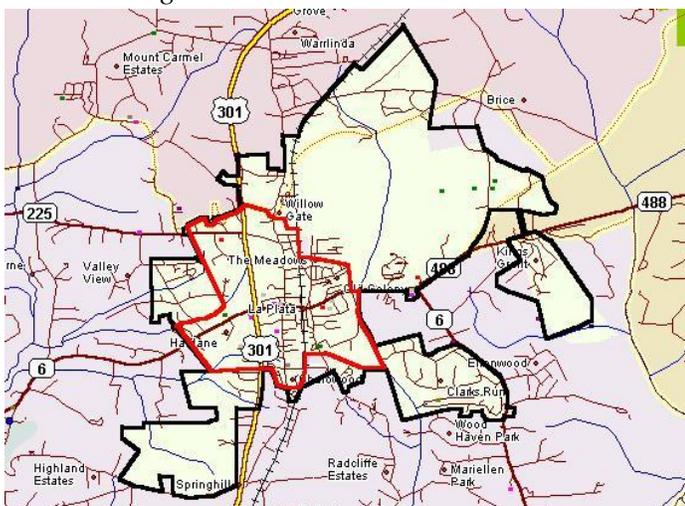
Figure 1-2 County Seat



of grants available to encourage new towns to develop. Interstate General Corporation received one of these grants and purchased a large tract of land, bisected by Rt 301 in the Waldorf, Maryland area. The primary market for the homes that were built was the metropolitan Washington D.C. area and Charles County's transition from an agricultural economy to a bedroom community for the nation's capital was begun. As the concentration of the population shifted to the new

community of St. Charles and the Waldorf area, La Plata began to experience much of the same type of change that occurred in Port Tobacco when the railroad came through. Within the next ten years, La Plata lost three department stores, a hardware store, two auto supply stores and numerous other businesses that had made the Town the center of activity in Charles County. The biggest difference between what happened in Port Tobacco and La Plata was that the County Seat and Court House remained in La Plata, even when the commercial center of the County shifted north. The population of Charles County increased from 35,000 in 1960 to more than 120,000 in the 2000 census. The Courts and other County facilities increased proportionately and La Plata's main industry at the time the tornado struck in 2002 was governmental activities.

Figure 1-3 Town Limits 2000



As a side effect of the rapid growth in the Waldorf area, a number of new housing developments were created in the rest of the County and the demand for housing in La Plata exceeded the amount of undeveloped land that was available. To meet the demand, the Town annexed a 450 acre parcel of land and its first neighborhood subdivision was built in Clarks Run. It turned out to be very popular and set the pattern for future development within the Town. Figure 1-3 shows the Town Limits when it was originally incorporated in red. The black line includes all of the annexations that

had occurred by the time the tornado went through in 2002. By then, several commercial developments had been built along Crain Highway including four major retail stores. La Plata was once again beginning to serve as a commercial center for the southern portion of Charles County.

YEAR	SIZE IN ACRES	POPULATION
1960	1082	1214
1970	1098	1561
1980	3321	2484
1990	4127	5841
2000	4636	6600
2010	4885	8753

Table 1 shows the pace of growth in La Plata, both in area and in population, over the last fifty years.

2. EMERGENCY SERVICES

The La Plata Police Department was the primary agency responsible for maintaining order in the Town in the midst of the destruction that took place when the tornado hit. The La Plata Police Department at that time consisted of a Police Chief, 10 sworn officers and one administrative assistant. Since then, 5 additional sworn officers have been added, but at that time, the Town Police Department had to depend heavily on the assistance they received from other departments. The Charles County Sheriff's Office provides police protection throughout the County and also has co-jurisdiction in the Town of La Plata. Their headquarters is located on Crain Highway within the Town Limits next to the County Detention Center. In addition to these two agencies, the Maryland State Police Barrack is located on Crain Highway approximately 1 mile north of the Town. All of these agencies have mutual aid agreements with each other and with St. Mary's and Calvert Counties as well. All of them were needed to maintain order and provide security during the search and rescue portions of the incident as well as the cleanup and recovery.

The La Plata Volunteer Fire Department provides fire protection to the Town of La Plata and the surrounding area. It is one of 13 volunteer fire departments in Charles County and is funded by a Countywide Fire and Rescue Tax. There are no career full time employees in any of the volunteer fire departments. Each is an independent entity, but they are all part of an automatic mutual aid system. The County operates a communications system under the supervision of the Emergency Management Coordinator and dispatches all fire and rescue units. At least three fire departments are alerted on all building fires and major incidents. The level of expertise of these departments is higher than might be expected from a fully volunteer system because a high percentage of the volunteers are also full time career firefighters in neighboring jurisdictions.

Ten of the volunteer fire departments also provide ambulance service and there are three exclusively volunteer EMS departments in Charles County. All of these companies provide Basic Life Support Service and there was an independent volunteer Advanced Life Support Unit housed on Billingsley Road off Crain Highway in the northern part of the County in 2002. With the increased population, it became very difficult to staff the ambulances on a regular basis with volunteers. Since that time, the County has found it necessary to supplement the volunteers with full time career employees. These employees all report to the Emergency Management Coordinator and are integrated into the volunteer system.

All of the emergency services in Charles County maintain a close relationship with their counterparts in neighboring jurisdictions. Automatic mutual aid agreements are in force and frequently the initial response to an emergency includes units from a neighboring county, or even from Virginia. When the tornado hit, The DC Fire and EMS Collapse Task Force responded from the Nation's Capital to assist the fire department. This arrangement served La Plata well when the tornado struck on April 28, 2002.

3. THE STORM ARRIVES

April 28, 2002 was a pleasant Sunday afternoon in La Plata. It was a sunny day with very little warning of the destruction that would soon take place. A tornadic thunderstorm developed in West Virginia near Charleston. It moved across the Appalachian Mountains and touched down once or twice in Virginia, but caused very little damage. The storm changed character as it crossed the Potomac River and developed a strong "hook" pattern on the radar. It touched down about 2 miles east of the Potomac River and caused some significant damage to several houses in rural Charles County. It was generally about F1 in strength at that time, but it began to increase in violence as it crossed Rose Hill Road and Valley Road about 1 mile west of La Plata. It approached F3 strength as it entered the Town and completely destroyed several houses in the Quailwood subdivision. Figure 3-1 shows a picture taken as the tornado approached the Town of La Plata and 3-2 shows a flattened dwelling.

Figure 3-1 approaching Town



The Townspeople had very little warning. A few minutes before the tornado hit, the media transmitted some concern that there might be a tornado approaching, but the anticipated path of the storm was centered north of La Plata around Waldorf. As it entered the Town, it destroyed the

Archbishop Neale School on Port Tobacco Road and made a direct hit at the intersection of Crain Highway and Port Tobacco Road. It then proceeded on through town with a swath of damage about 650 yards wide at its worst. It was moving at a speed of more than 60 mph and passed through Town in only a few minutes. The intensity varied from F3 to F4 and may have reached F5 on the Fujita scale as it moved through the Town and left areas of nearly total destruction. The greatest damage seemed to occur in the center of the Town's Business District. The photograph shown in Figure 3-3 was taken while the tornado was destroying the MSI Home Improvement Store. It was taken from a point about 3 blocks north of Charles Street on Kent Avenue.

Figure 3-2 House in Quailwood



It was only the fact that this happened on a Sunday evening when many of the buildings were vacant that prevented a massive loss of life. There would have certainly been many fatalities if the school that was destroyed had been in session. Heavy cement slabs used for the roof of the building fell down into the class rooms, the windows were blown out and some of the walls collapsed. The United Methodist Church near the intersection of Rt 301 and 6 had the second story completely removed from the educational wing of the church. Just the week before, there had been a youth group meeting in that building at 7 PM. This Sunday, the building was empty. In spite of the fact that there

were nearly 500 buildings destroyed or severely damaged in the Town, there were no fatalities in any of them. Five people died as a result of the tornado, three of them in Charles County and two in Calvert. The only fatality within the Town Limits was a heart attack victim s caught by the tornado in a vehicle on Route 301.

3.1 NOT THE FIRST OR THE WORST

This was not the first tornado to hit La Plata. While it was apparently the strongest and did the most property damage, it was not the worst one. On November 9, 1926, what was then the worst tornado ever to hit the state of Maryland came through La Plata. It would have probably been at least an F4 on the Fujita scale. La Plata had a two room frame school building at that time and

Figure 3-3 Destroying the business district

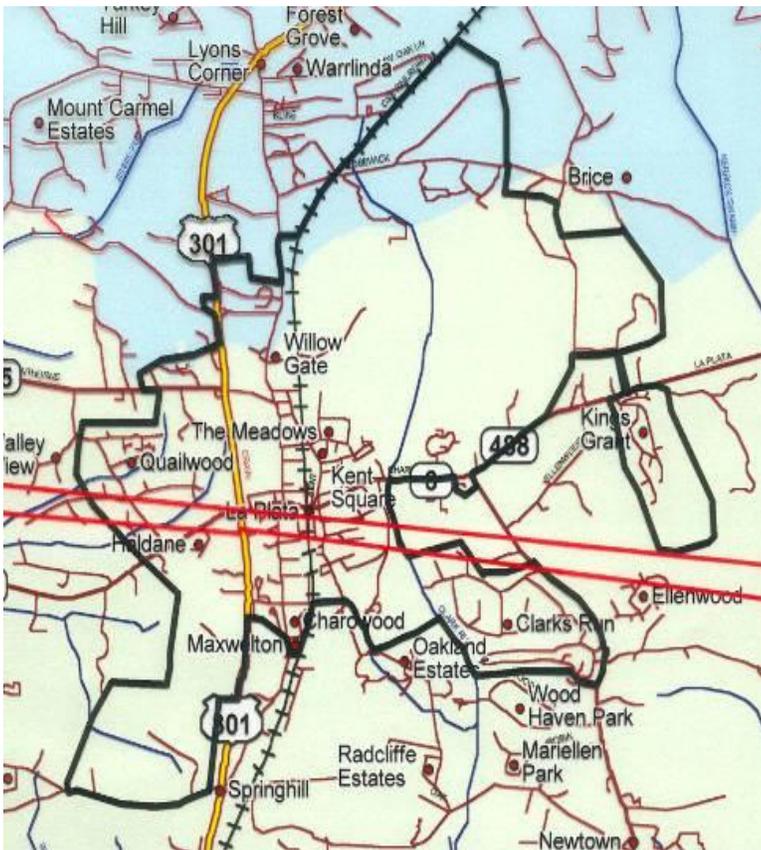


school was in session when the tornado hit. 16 La Plata, Maryland, residents, fourteen of them children, were killed and 40 others were hurt as a result of the tornado. Twelve of the fourteen children died when the tornado struck the school. There was no hospital in Charles County so the injured were loaded into automobiles and transported to Washington D. C. to receive medical care. Primarily as a result of that tornado, a hospital was built in La Plata. That hospital has been expanded several times and still provides

excellent medical care to the residents of Charles County at the present time.

While the path of the 1926 tornado was very different from the 2002 tornado, they intersected and both hit the same spot in the middle of La Plata. The house that now stands on the approximate location of the old school building was severely damaged in 2002. Observers stated that it is extremely rare for two tornados to hit the same spot 75 years apart, but that is what happened in La Plata. Figure 3-4 shows the path the tornado took when it went through the Central Business District of La Plata. It crossed Rt 301 at the intersection with Rt 6, the busiest intersection in La Plata. It then took a straight path through the center of the business district. It couldn't have been a more direct hit if it had been carefully aimed to do the most possible damage to the community.

Figure 3 – 4 path of tornado



The intersection of Rt 301 and Rt 6 was very busy at 7PM on a Sunday afternoon and several cars were waiting for the traffic light to change when the tornado came through. One victim related that the tornado picked up her car, moved it 50 feet and set it down pointed in a different direction. Fortunately, she wasn't seriously injured. The only fatality within the Town Limits came when the occupant of a pickup truck suffered a heart attack. He was declared dead on arrival at the hospital.

There was a Kentucky Fried Chicken Restaurant in front of the shopping center shown in figure 3-5. It was completely demolished and is not visible in the picture. There were several customers and some employees in the restaurant at the time. They heard the tornado approach, took refuge in the rest room and none of them was seriously injured. Even though it had been more than 75 years since the last major tornado came through La Plata, people seemed instinctively to know what to do. There was story after story about people that took refuge in an interior room or a basement and survived the tornado with no serious injuries.

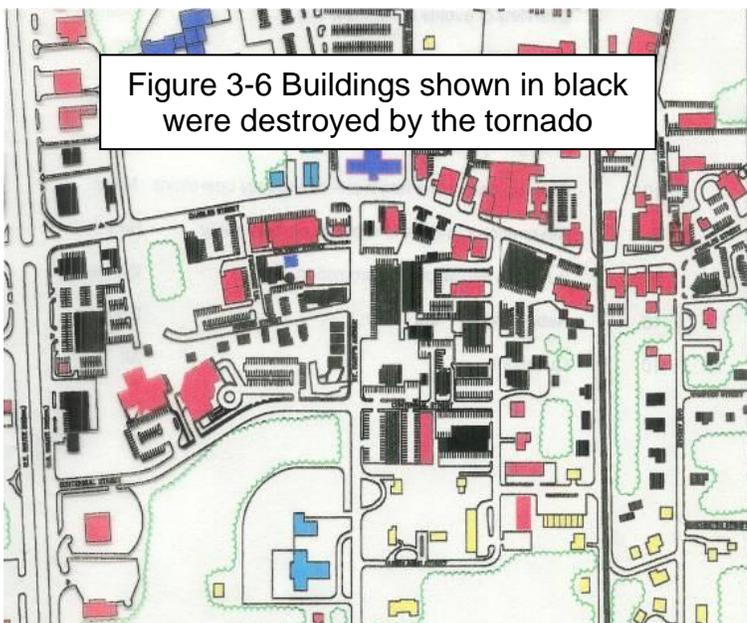
3.2 EXTENT OF THE DAMAGE

Not only was this tornado fast moving, it stayed on the ground and cut a swath across Charles and Calvert Counties that was 26 miles long. Large hail stones the size of baseballs accompanied the tornado outside the center of the vortex and caused major damage to buildings not affected by the wind. The intensity of the storm varied as it traveled rapidly across Southern Maryland, but it seemed to be at its worst as it moved through the Town of La Plata. As it passed through the rural areas, many houses were destroyed. One farmer lost 7 barns. Others lost livestock. Still, the bulk of the property loss occurred in the Town, primarily because of the number of relatively large, high value buildings and the high density residential neighborhoods.

Figure 3-5 Intersection of Rt 301 and Charles St on Tuesday morning



Figure 3-6 Buildings shown in black were destroyed by the tornado



It was difficult to decide whether buildings were a total loss or just severely damaged, but best estimates show the following losses:

- 41 Single family homes
- 6 Apartment buildings (primarily single family homes converted to apartments)
- 48 Commercial buildings (housing 165 businesses)
- 1 School building
- 1 Church
- 1 Water Tower

In addition to the ones that were totally destroyed, 430 buildings had major damage and were

temporarily uninhabitable, but appeared to be repairable.

One interesting thing was that some of the buildings that looked to be a total loss were actually repaired. Others that didn't appear to be too badly damaged were structurally unsound and had to be torn down. A new three story office building with two floors of parking was under construction on Centennial Street when the tornado hit. It wasn't seriously damaged, but a tower crane that was being used for its construction was a total loss. It didn't collapse and appeared to survive the tornado without much damage. Further inspection showed that it was twisted in such a way that it was beyond repair. It was cut up and sold for scrap metal.

The tornado just skirted the edges of two of the Town's residential subdivisions and less than 50 out of 700 single family dwellings in these subdivisions suffered major damage. What damage there was came primarily from the hail and wind damage to trees and landscaping.

4. INITIAL RESPONSE

Even though most of the property damage occurred within the Town of La Plata, this tornado stayed on the ground for 26 miles. There was property damage spread out from the village of Ripley west of La Plata to the Patuxent River on the eastern boundary of Charles County. Emergency services units were responding to calls all over the County. Damage was also wide spread in Calvert County and the St. Mary's County units were called on to assist from the very start of the incident.

An emergency command post was set up in the parking lot of the County Office Building in La Plata. A Chief Officer from the La Plata Fire Department was the incident commander and assumed responsibility for directing the search and rescue operation. The initial search took place immediately. It was followed by a more detailed

search and rescue effort. The DC Fire and EMS Cave in Task Force arrived at 11 PM and assisted in the Search and Rescue operation throughout the night. A final search covering the same territory took place on Monday morning after daylight to verify that no victim had been overlooked. Rescue workers were gratified to find that no one was trapped in the debris, there were no fatalities in the Town and no serious rescue problems were encountered.

When the water tank was destroyed, the Town's water system was drained and there was no water in the fire hydrants. Fortunately, there were no fires during the entire incident, even through the cleanup operation in the following days. As the tornado went through, the electric lines were destroyed and there was no electricity anywhere in the damaged area that could have been a source of ignition. La Plata does not have any natural gas lines to cause a fire or explosion either.

Figure 4-1 CCRS Building



A western triage area was established in the parking lot of the Safeway store at the intersection of Crain Highway and Charles Street. An eastern site was set up in front of the Port Tobacco Theater on Charles Street. The Medstar helicopter responded and was stationed at the western triage site. The emergency medical units performed first aid and transported the injured to the hospital for treatment. No serious injuries were reported, but

more than 200 patients were treated at Civista Medical Center for various injuries. While there was some minor damage to the hospital building, it remained fully functional throughout the incident. The Charles County Rescue Squad (CCRS) building, where the first due ambulances were housed was damaged by the tornado. Even more important, access to the building was blocked by debris. It was some time until ambulances could get out of the building to treat and transport the injured. By a stroke of good fortune, one of the Rescue Squad BLS units was on Rt 301 several miles north of La Plata returning from a call in Waldorf when the tornado went through. This ambulance responded immediately to the intersection of Rt 301 and Rt 6 where many of the injured were concentrated. A number of mutual aid ambulances from other stations also responded immediately and they were able to care for the injured in a timely manner.

Figure 4-2 CCSD Mobile Command Post



The La Plata Police Department, the Charles County Sheriff's Department (CCSD) and the Maryland State Police (MSP) responded immediately. Their first concern was controlling traffic and providing access to the area for emergency vehicles. Security was a secondary concern, both to prevent looting and to control access to keep bystanders and residents of the damaged buildings from being injured. They also

prevented anyone from entering damaged buildings that might be in danger of collapsing. Within 15 minutes of the time the tornado went through the Town, representatives from all types of emergency service agencies arrived at the command post and began to get it organized. All mutual aid units reported to the command post when they arrived and received their assignments from the incident commander. A number of mobile command posts were also there within a short time. The Charles County Sheriff's mobile command post unit shown in Figure 4-2 was positioned at the command post in the parking lot and provided communications with all emergency units responding and on the scene. The Maryland State Police and State Highway mobile command units soon arrived as well. A tent was set up and used by the fire department incident commander as a command center to co-ordinate the search and rescue operation.

Local government officials arrived at the Command Post within minutes of the time the tornado went through Town. All contact with the media took place at the Command Post and all of the different agencies were represented there. Representatives from the State Highway Administration (SHA) including the Secretary of Transportation, Maryland State Police and other state agencies arrived at the command post within the hour, ready to do whatever had to be done to cope with the emergency situation.

5. IMMEDIATE ACTION

Once the damaged areas were secured and the Search and Rescue operation underway, there were a number of immediate needs that had to be addressed. First and most important was to take care of the injured and homeless. The Red Cross responded immediately and began to provide for those in need. An emergency shelter was set up at the Thomas Stone High School in Waldorf and arrangements made to care for the residents that had lost everything when the tornado destroyed their homes.

A Field Emergency Operations Center was set up at the Town Hall to co-ordinate the cleanup and recovery efforts. The Town Hall was damaged and sections of the roof were torn off by the storm, but the building was habitable and safe for occupancy. There was no electricity at the Town Hall and it was discovered that the Town's telephone system and the radio base station both required electricity to work. The Town Hall did not have an emergency generator and a portable generator was brought in the next day to get the communications system operational and to provide lighting.

The hospital was damaged by the storm but was still fully functional. It had an emergency generator that started automatically and supplied electricity to the building. Their biggest problem was the loss of water pressure coming from the Town's system when the water tank was destroyed.

The capacity of the water tank that was destroyed was only 75,000 gallons of water and the system had two other tanks that still had more than 1,000,000 gallons in storage. Unfortunately, when the tank was destroyed by the tornado, the riser was broken at ground level. The entire 1,000,000 gallons stored in the other elevated tanks escaped through the broken pipe and drained the system within minutes of the time the tornado hit. Many water pipes were broken when buildings were destroyed. When the water pressure was restored, the Town Public Works Crews had to turn off the individual cutoff valves to prevent further loss from the system. One difficulty was the fact that the destruction was so complete that the maintenance crews had trouble finding where the shutoff valves were located.

The Town had three major production wells in service at the time of the tornado and none of them were damaged. The electricity was lost at all of them and none of the pumps would run to refill the system after it was drained. One of the wells had an emergency generator, but it didn't start. It

turned out that it was down for maintenance and was not usable. The district manager for the local electric co-operative came to the emergency command post by the County office building as soon as it was established. Once it was determined that the hospital was up and running on its own emergency power, top priority was given to getting electricity to some of the town's wells and getting the Town water system back in operation. The electric company did an outstanding job of getting power to the wells, even though they had something like 49 poles and associated wiring destroyed. One of the wells was located in the north end of Town and the electrical system was intact in that area. All that was needed to get the electricity back on to that well was to disconnect the damaged portion of the system the tornado had destroyed and close the circuit breakers that had tripped automatically. Power was back to this well by 7:30. The valve supplying the broken riser was shut, water began to flow into the system and it was back in operation at reduced pressure. A second well was back on line by 8:30 and by 10:00, the pressure was nearly normal at the hospital and well within the usable range. This happened just in time. The hospital had called one of the local trucks used to fill swimming pools and was in the process of connecting it into their system. Because the pressure in the town system was now in a usable range, the tank truck was never connected. The concern was that if water was introduced from an outside source, there was a possibility of contamination and the hospital system would need to be disinfected to be sure that it was safe for human consumption. This experience pointed out the need for emergency power. Since that time, emergency generators with automatic switch gear have been installed at three of the Town's four production wells. They are maintained regularly, tested under full load at least once each month and can provide all the water the Town uses without any electricity coming in from the outside.

The Wastewater treatment plant suffered minor damage and the electricity was interrupted. The

plant has an emergency generator that will supply enough power to operate the entire plant. When the electricity went out, the generator started and the plant automatically transferred to emergency power. Some of the pump stations in the sewer collection system were without electrical power. Since there was no water available, any sanitary sewer overflows were minimal.

Nearly all of the Town's public works employees and the Maryland Environmental Service employees live outside of Town. As the word spread, most of them tried to come in to help with the cleanup and recovery. Due to the damage and debris, most of the roads were blocked and it was some time until anything more than a skeleton force was available.

Figure 5-1 Mobile canteens



Emergency services personnel worked through the night and needed sustenance. Several of the local restaurants provided food and drinks at the command post. A number of golf carts made their appearance and several of the local service groups traveled throughout the damaged area delivering food and drinks to the rescue workers and people that were helping to clear enough debris to make the streets and roads passable. This service continued through the two weeks of the cleanup and recovery. The Red Cross brought in six of their mobile canteens, some from Virginia, West

Virginia and other locations some distance away from La Plata. They provided food and drinks as they traveled throughout the area that was destroyed by the tornado. A mobile canteen from a church group on the Eastern Shore of Maryland set up in a trailer at the intersection of Oak Avenue and Worcester Street and provided three meals a day for the entire neighborhood while the power was out. This unit continued to feed the neighborhood and emergency workers for two weeks while the major cleanup was taking place. All of this was done as a service to the community without any charge for anything that was provided.

The police departments had two primary responsibilities. First and foremost, they had to handle traffic. All of the streets in the heart of Town were clogged with debris and were impassible. To complicate the problem, many cars tried to get into La Plata. Some of these were sightseers, but many of them genuinely tried to help clean up and assist residents and business people to retrieve their valuables and make what was left of their properties secure. Many residents of the Town were not at home when the tornado went through. As they tried to return to their homes and property owners attempted to check on their property, the police departments had to control access to make sure that anyone coming into Town had a legitimate reason to be there.

Once traffic was under control, the police had to maintain security in the damaged areas. Looting is an ever present danger during a natural disaster like this. There was a sufficient police presence to safeguard what was left during the night while the search and rescue operation was under way and the town was dark without street lights or electricity. Looting was never a problem and we are only aware of one case where the police had to arrest anyone. One of the Sheriff's Deputies that was on duty observed a young man carrying a TV set down the street. He caught the young man and arrested him. Of course it was difficult to determine whether personal property was lost to

the tornado or stolen, but there was no indication that there were any other instances of looting.

6. PROBLEM AREAS

The first and most important thing was to complete the search and rescue operations in the damaged area. Once that was well under way, it was time to begin the recovery and there were a number of problems that had to be dealt with immediately.

1. The most immediate problem was the lack of communications. All of the telephone cables, cable TV and electric lines in the damaged area were totally destroyed.

Figure 6-1 electric poles down



Figure 6-1 is typical of the conditions the utility crews faced on Monday morning. It wasn't just a matter of repairing the lines. Electricity was out across two counties. Getting it back in service was comparable to building an entirely new system. All of the regular telephone



service was out, and cell phone towers were overloaded. In addition to the lack of service, demand was heavy as the owners tried to check on their property and people that they knew who lived in the Town.

Figure 6-2 telephone terminal

2. People in La Plata depend heavily on the Comcast Cable TV system. Very few of them have antennas that would enable them to receive news broadcasts over the air. The Town has made arrangements for emergency announcements over the CATV system, but all the cable system had had been destroyed and this means of communicating with the residents of Town was not available. It was several days before CATV service became available within the damaged area.
3. The Town Hall was usable, but without electricity, the telephone system was out of service. During the initial phases of the incident, it was difficult for Town officials to communicate with the residents and emergency personnel. A portable generator was obtained and it supplied power to the telephone system, the radio base station and emergency lighting.

7. BEGINNING THE CLEANUP

The full extent of the damage wasn't obvious until daylight the next morning. Most of the streets in the downtown were clogged with trees and debris and were not passable. The view on Maple Avenue, as shown in Figure 7-1, was typical of the problems that faced the Town on Monday morning. Town officials met with the County Commissioners and reached agreement as to the best way to approach the cleanup. The County agreed to begin disposing of the debris at the County Landfill and set up a burn site on Radio Station Road until some long term arrangements could be made. A second burn site was established on Rosewick Road in a gravel pit. Quite a bit of

the wooden waste was disposed of by using chippers and converting it to mulch. Stumps and household debris would have to be taken to a rubble landfill, but all of these were some distance from Charles County. It was agreed that some type of temporary storage or a transfer station in the vicinity of the Town would be needed, once the major cleanup began.

Figure 7-1 South Maple Avenue



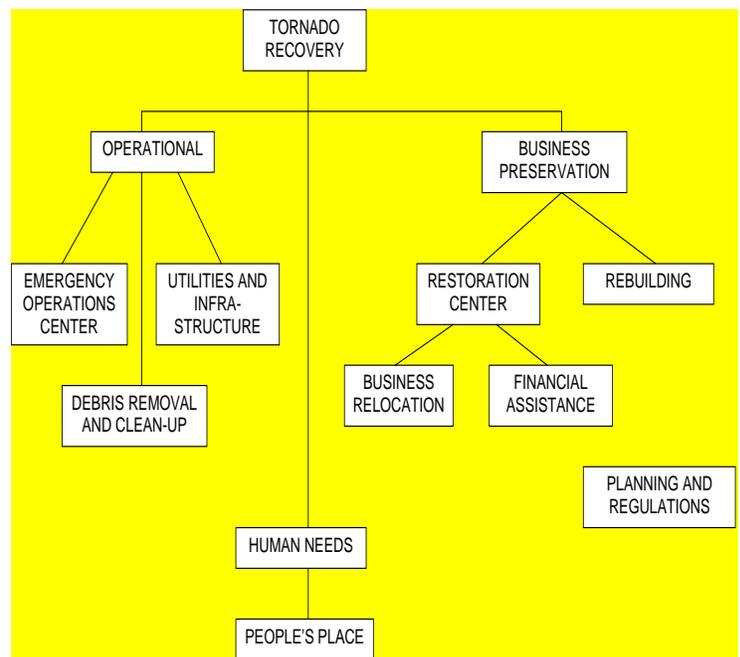
The State of Maryland had purchased a tract of land alongside Rt 301 for potential road construction about 2 miles north of La Plata.

This land was vacant and the Maryland Environmental Service agreed to set up a transfer station to handle the debris that needed to go to a rubble dump. Transportation to the final destination would be arranged later. The Transfer station covered 3 acres initially, but had to be expanded to 6 acres before the cleanup was completed.

The Mayor and the President of the County Commissioners met the first thing Monday morning and agreed on a division of

responsibilities. Their primary concern was to concentrate on getting the job done and eliminate any potential duplication of efforts or “turf wars”. There were no serious disagreements and an agreement was quickly reached. This meeting set the pattern, and there was never any instance where there was a major difference of opinion or conflict between County and Town officials all during the recovery effort. Figure 7-2 is a chart showing the organization and division of responsibilities that was agreed on.

Figure 7-2 Organization Chart for Recovery



In general, the County would take care of human needs and arrange for the care of the people that had been displaced by the tornado. The County already had a structure through their Community Services Agency and the Charles County Social Services Department that was used to dealing with this sort of problem that could take the lead in getting this effort organized. The Town would take the lead in the cleanup in and around the Town of La Plata while the County would organize the cleanup outside of the La Plata area. The Town would also assume responsibility for preservation and rebuilding of the businesses that were impacted.

The consensus was that there were a number of things that had to be taken care of as soon as possible. All of these had to be dealt with simultaneously.

1. An emergency operations center (EOC) was needed to co-ordinate the search and rescue operation. An EOC was set up in the County Office Building and the supervisor at the 911 center agreed to take charge of the Center. Police, fire and emergency medical activities were directed from this EOC all during the clean-up and recovery effort. The Emergency Management Director from Ocean City, Maryland arrived on Monday morning and worked with Charles County Emergency Management personnel in setting up the EOC and getting it in operation. A progress meeting was held at the EOC every morning with someone in attendance to represent each phase of the recovery. The Town Manager and his assistant represented the Town at these meetings. This center remained in operation for the first two weeks of the recovery.

2. Human needs had to be met. There were people that had lost everything to the storm. A number of buildings were totally demolished and all personal possessions, clothing, valuable papers and all the things that a person accumulates over the years were destroyed. The initial concern was providing shelter and basic toilet articles on Sunday night, immediately after the storm went through. By Monday morning people needed clothing and other assistance to begin to get their lives together again. The County agreed to take the lead in getting this effort organized. A number of office trailers were brought in and set up in the parking lot of the County Office Building with a large sign that said "Peoples Place" shown in Figure 7-3. Agencies such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Lutheran Mission

Society, Catholic Charities, and others were available from the start. A number of governmental agencies were also represented such as FEMA, Maryland Insurance Commissioner's office and others that were in a position to provide the assistance individuals would need. This center remained in operation for several weeks.



Figure 7-3 People's Place

3. Streets and roads were clogged with debris and especially in the Town, were impassable. Figure 7-4 shows the conditions crews faced on Monday morning when the cleanup began. The recovery effort really couldn't get started until the streets and roads were made usable for the trucks and heavy equipment that would be required to handle the debris. The worst damage occurred in and around the Town. The Town agreed to co-ordinate this phase of the cleanup in that area while the County would work with State Highway crews to begin cleaning up in the remainder of the County. The Town Manager assumed responsibility for organizing and supervising this effort in and around La Plata.

Figure 7-4 Blocked street



The Mayor of Ocean City, Maryland and his Director of Emergency Management arrived on Monday and were instrumental in helping to get the cleanup and recovery organized without any delay. A Field Emergency Operations Center was set up in the Town Hall to coordinate the cleanup. This center was operated on a day to day basis under the direction of the safety director from Ocean City. He was a trained and experienced incident commander and had been involved in previous natural disasters. The Town was divided into five zones and each crew was assigned to one of them when they reported in. As relief crews arrived from other jurisdictions, they reported to the Town Hall and the cleanup effort was managed from this center.

8. BUSINESS PRESERVATION AND RESTORATION

Because La Plata is the County Seat and is located in the center of Charles County, many professionals such as Doctors, Dentists and Lawyers had their offices in the area that was destroyed. The first priority was to find a place for them to re-locate. The second concern was to let their customers know where they were and how to reach them.

The Town does not require any type of business license, and there was no master list of what businesses and professional offices were in La Plata. One of the members of the Town Council took over the responsibility for compiling this information and finding out where each of the displaced businesses and professional offices were now located. The Charles County Chamber of Commerce and the County Economic Development Agency were both very helpful in gathering this information. Once the information was obtained, the Maryland Independent newspaper included a comprehensive list of where and how the businesses that were relocated could be reached in the paper when it was published on Friday.

Some of the larger businesses were able to bring in office trailers or temporary buildings and continue to do business in the same location or close by. Figure 8-1 shows the office trailer CVS pharmacy brought in within a few days and set up in the parking lot of the shopping center in front of their store to enable them to continue to meet the needs of their customers.

Figure 8-1 CVS office trailer



Figure 8-2 depicts the temporary buildings Baldus Real Estate used for their sales office. This

building was located in a vacant lot next door to the one that was destroyed by the tornado.

Figure 8-2 temporary office building



Many of the businesses that were destroyed were small businesses with very limited resources. One of the biggest concerns was that they find temporary quarters and continue to operate in the Town rather than going out of business or relocating to Waldorf. To help them recover, the Town established a restoration center in the Town Hall to assist them to get back in business. One of the Town Council Members was in charge of this center. He was especially helpful because he was a Certified Public Accountant and was able to provide timely advice to some of the smaller businesses in dealing with the financial repercussions of their situation. Representatives of all the various organizations that might be helpful

in accomplishing this goal were there and business owners were able to deal with all of the difficulties that had to be overcome in one location. Participants in this restoration center included Verizon, Southern Maryland Electric, Booz Allen IT consultants, Baldus Real Estate and the Charles County Economic Development Commission. Various state agencies including the Department of Business and Economic Development, Maryland Department of the Environment, Maryland Department of Planning, State Insurance Commissioner, etc. were well represented at this center. FEMA also had a representative stationed there. The Executive Director of the Governor's Office of Business Advocacy and Business Assistance and his assistant helped get this Center organized. Both of them arrived in La Plata on Tuesday morning and stayed with the recovery for several months. They were especially helpful in making the necessary contacts with other state agencies and provided advice, guidance and financial assistance directly to individual business owners. The Small Business Assistance (SBA) agency was very active in helping to provide financing for rebuilding.

9. TEMPORARY TOWN CENTER

There was some vacant office space in the Town when the tornado hit, but not all of it was in a

Figure 9.1 Temporary Town Center



visible or convenient location. Paul Facchina, the owner of Facchina Construction Company was in the process of building a new building for his corporate headquarters on Centennial Street. He came to the Town Council at a special meeting held on Monday morning and offered to build a temporary town center on land that he owned across the street from his new building. He said that he could have it ready for occupancy within a week. He warned them that to get this done he might not be able to follow all of the Town's rules and regulations. He was told that rules and regulations would not be a problem. The Town Council makes the rules and they were willing to make any changes or issue any waivers that might be needed to get the businesses back in operation. A bigger concern might be whether some of the small businesses that had lost everything through the tornado would be able to afford the rent in addition to replacing equipment and stock they had lost. The next day he came back and said that he had solved the rent problem. When asked what the rent would be, he said that the rent would be whatever they could afford. He had talked to a number of corporations that were willing to become sponsors and would subsidize the rent so that any of the businesses could afford it. He immediately began clearing the land and preparing for the temporary office buildings. All utilities were connected to the site. The Town had to get a special permit to move the oversize units over the Interstate Highway System, but were able to do that without causing any significant amount of delay. Within one week, on Tuesday, May 7, the center was complete and the first occupant, a hair dresser, opened for business. At that time, the parking lot was paved, striped and landscaping was in place. This center provided space for 20 businesses to operate. Some of them moved out in just a few months, others stayed for the full two year limit the owner had set. Figure 9-1 shows how the temporary town center looked when it was in operation.

10. LA PLATA'S VISION

Once the immediate needs have been taken care of after a natural disaster like La Plata's tornado, some major decisions have to be made. As a general rule, the local government would like to take advantage of the situation and build back structures that are much better than the ones that were destroyed. There may be an opportunity to completely change the character of the community and make it a much better place to live. Developing a plan to make that happen can take what seems to be a long time. Property owners don't have the same concerns. Business owners, in particular, are concerned primarily with rebuilding as soon as possible, re-opening their business, serving their customers and beginning to receive income again. When the tornado hit La Plata, the Town had a head start on developing a plan and was in a position to proceed with the rebuilding immediately.

When the Nice Bridge was completed in 1940, Crain Highway became a through route for travelers from New England to Florida. Slot machines drew tourists to Southern Maryland and by 1960, traffic became heavy enough that Crain Highway was converted to a dual highway. While Rt 301 was not part of the Interstate Highway System, it offered an alternative to I 95 and through traffic continued to increase. As the community became more oriented toward the metropolitan Washington area, traffic congestion on Rt 301 began to be a serious problem. In 1994, Governor Schaefer appointed a task force to look at Rt 301 south of Bowie to explore various ways the congestion could be relieved and make recommendations to the SHA. The Mayor and Town Manager were members of this task force. The task force came to the conclusion that one of the primary causes of congestion on Rt 301 was the fact that too many of the people that lived in Southern Maryland worked in Washington. One of their recommendations was that the Town of La Plata participate in a demonstration project to develop a new land use plan that would improve the jobs/housing balance in the Town and Southern Maryland in general.

After the final report was received, Governor Glendenning appointed a Project Oversight Committee (POC) to proceed with implementing the recommendations of the task force. The Town took their proposal to create a Vision Plan to the POC. The POC enthusiastically supported the town and agreed to help finance the project. Very little funding was available and the Town met with the Governor, The Secretary of Transportation and the Maryland Department of Planning to attempt to gain their support. Everyone was very enthused with the approach the Town was taking, but none of them were able or willing to provide the money to pay for it.

Since no state funding was available, one of the local businessmen solicited 9 other businesses to help pay for the project. He raised \$1,000 for a one day workshop to explore some of the ways that congestion could be relieved within the Town. A traffic consultant was hired and 45 people met at the College of Southern Maryland to develop a plan. As a result of this workshop, the Town decided to expand the traffic study to include creating a Vision Plan for the future of the Town that would serve to accomplish the objective set by the Rt301 South task force, even if the entire project had to be funded locally. While the State did not produce the money needed to pay for the project, all of the efforts that had been expended bore fruit when the tornado hit. The Governor and his cabinet, all state agencies and local government officials were fully cognizant of what the Town was trying to accomplish and made every effort to help the Town rebuild according to its Vision Plan.

In 1999, three years before the tornado, the Town hired a team of consultants to explore the vision the residents had for the future of the Town and prepare a plan to accomplish it. More than 80

residents, business people and property owners of La Plata and the surrounding area came together five times for full day planning workshops. As a result of these meetings, the consultants prepared a "Vision Plan for Greater La Plata" that the Mayor and Council adopted in March of 2000. A Vision implementation team was appointed and met regularly to develop an action plan to accomplish the vision. As a result of their efforts, the Mayor and Council adopted an Urban Design for Downtown La Plata in March of 2001. As depicted in Figure 11-1, the plan was to eventually demolish nearly everything north of Charles Street and build a new Town Center. The Implementation team continued to meet and by April of 2002 when the tornado went through, had nearly completed a series of design guidelines for commercial properties and laid the groundwork for a Design Review Board to administer them.

As a result of all this preliminary work, the Mayor and Council knew what they wanted to accomplish and had the basis for a plan to rebuild the Town already in place when the tornado destroyed most of the Central Business District. There were four basic goals included in the Urban Design Plan that would be incorporated into the plan to rebuild the Town.

1. Create a walking downtown that would become a destination for the remainder of Charles County and Southern Maryland.
2. Increase the density in the downtown.
3. Encourage mixed use buildings with businesses on the first floor and residences on the upper floors to increase the number of people within walking distance of the Central Business District.
4. Attract more retail and service businesses to the downtown.



Figure 11-1 Urban design plan for La Plata

The implementation of the Vision Plan was scheduled in four phases. The first phase was to upgrade the infra-structure and improve traffic patterns in the downtown. The next phase was to acquire two large properties north of Charles Street, a Coca Cola distribution center and a petroleum bulk plant that may not be the most appropriate use for a central business district. Phase 3 would be the redevelopment of these properties into a Town Center that would make La Plata a destination and create a walking downtown. Finally, Phase 4 would have re-developed the existing central business district south of Charles Street. The tornado re-arranged this schedule, and phase four suddenly became phase one.

La Plata's Vision Plan was foremost in everyone's mind when they heard about the tornado. One of the first comments the President of the Charles County Commissioners made on Monday morning was "We are going to help La Plata realize its Vision Plan". When the Governor arrived, his first

comment was that La Plata's Vision Plan was going to become a reality. The Secretary of Transportation told the Mayor at the command post on Sunday Evening "It looks like you will get your Neighborhood Conservation Program". One of the things the Town had been trying to accomplish as part of Phase 1 was to get SHA to improve the streetscape through the Neighborhood Conservation Program. This was a program that Governor Glendenning had instituted where some of the primary streets in a municipality also served as state highways. Many of the municipalities in Maryland grew up around

major highways and there was a lot of competition for the available funding. Up to that time, SHA had insisted that the money was all committed and there was no money available to begin a new streetscape project in La Plata. Now there would be.

11. A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS

The elected officials in La Plata had all been active in the Maryland Municipal League (MML). The Mayor had served a term as President, been on the Board of Directors and served on nearly every committee. The Mayor Pro Tem had served on the MML Board of Directors and on several committees. Other council members regularly attended the annual conference and had served on committees as well. The Town Manager and his assistant were members of the International City Manager's Association and had good relations with City Managers, not only in Maryland but at the national level. All of these relationships bore fruit when the tornado struck La Plata. The telephone started ringing immediately as all of

these people called to ask what they could do to help. The Town didn't want to bring in anyone they couldn't use immediately, so they thanked most of the callers and told them that they would let them know what was needed as the recovery progressed. To simplify the process, MML officials agreed to serve as a clearing house and arrange for help as it was needed. As the cleanup progressed, the Town would call MML. MML would then call the appropriate municipalities and let them know what type of help the Town needed at that time. By the time the cleanup was completed, 27 different jurisdictions had participated at no cost to the Town. In many instances, the individual workers that responded volunteered to come. As an example, one crew was assigned to assist the residents of a particular housing development to clean up their property and their neighborhood. As the cleanup progressed, they only worked on weekends in order to provide help to homeowners when they were available to clean up the debris on their properties. After four weeks, the municipality said they couldn't afford the overtime anymore. The entire crew volunteered to continue the cleanup without any pay from the city. Unfortunately, the city had to reject their offer to work "off the clock" due to legal and insurance considerations. This attitude was typical of everyone who participated in the recovery effort.

As a general rule, the workers that responded from other municipalities came in Town vehicles that they used during the cleanup. The Town made arrangements for lodging at nearby motels. The total cost for lodging amounted to more than \$30,000. The Town also provided meal vouchers for the workers and paid for breakfast and evening meals. Lunches were provided by the Salvation Army and Red Cross Mobile Canteens and other volunteer agencies.

There was a problem providing fuel for the trucks and heavy equipment. In order to expedite fueling and save time, a portable tank was delivered to the Town Hall parking lot and used to dispense diesel

fuel onsite. Because of all the trucks that were participating, it was obvious that too much time was being lost refueling. The Town arranged for a delivery truck to be stationed in the parking lot instead of the portable tank. The higher fill rate from the tank truck reduced the time spent in refueling and eliminated backups at the fueling station. The fuel truck was also able to go out into the Town and refill heavy equipment where it was working with a minimum of delay.

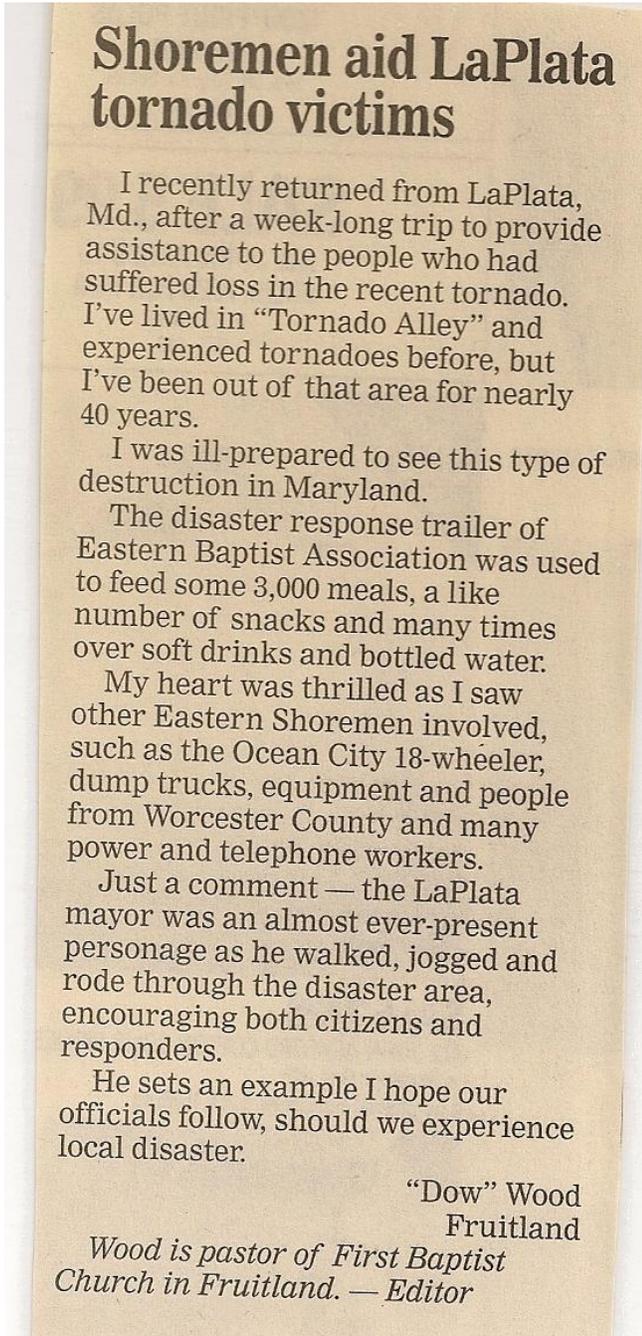
12. THE MAYOR'S ROLE

This type of natural disaster is a once in a life time event. The Mayor's approach was that he had spent 18 years preparing for this tornado and now it was time to get to work. One of the first things he did was call some Mayors in other towns that had experienced similar disasters. The Mayor of Moore, Oklahoma had experienced a tornado that was similar to the one that hit La Plata. The Mayor of Sussex Virginia went through a flood, different from a tornado but similar in many ways. When asked what their role was in the recovery from the disaster their Town had experienced, one of them commented that he served primarily as a cheer leader. What they had found was that the main thing people needed was to feel that somebody was in charge and had things under control. was happening and maintain personal contact with the people of La Plata. After the tornado, a friend from the Eastern Shore sent a newspaper clipping of a letter to the editor shown as Figure 12-1. This letter was one of his most precious reminders of a memorable time in his life.

To foster that attitude, the Mayor was always very visible and available to anyone with a question or a concern. He was generally out in the neighborhoods by 6AM and rarely got home before 9 PM. TV reporters liked to arrange for onsite interviews before 8 AM and he always tried to accommodate them. He rarely got in a vehicle and made very little use of the golf cart that the Town provided for him. He found that he was most effective on foot where he was able to see

what was happening and maintain personal contact with the people of La Plata. He didn't do as well meeting the needs of his wife. She has agreed to share her experiences during the tornado in an attachment to this document on page 40.

Figure 12-1 Letter to the editor



After the tornado, a friend from the Eastern Shore sent a newspaper clipping of a letter to the editor shown as Figure 12-1. This letter was one of his most precious reminders of a memorable time in his life.

Even though the Town had been working closely with the Governor and a number of State Agencies in trying to obtain funding for its Vision Plan, The Mayor was not familiar with the workings of State Government and wasn't sure where to go for help when it was needed. The Executive Director of the Governor's Office of Business Advocacy and his assistant were constantly at his side and guided him through each of the problems he had to deal with. They knew who he needed to see and what to tell them. Much of the success of the recovery effort was due to their in depth knowledge of State Government and their willingness to be there when they were needed.

13. THE GOVERNOR'S ROLE

Governor Glendenning and his staff arrived on Tuesday morning. He announced that the State was going to contribute over 2 million dollars to help the Town rebuild the Town. He said that a check for \$100,000 would arrive within the week that the Town could use anyway it saw fit to take care of its immediate needs. That check arrived within the week and it was one of the few times that the Town ever received anything from the State with no strings attached. Then there would be \$1,400,000 dollars available to enable La Plata to build back according to its vision plan. In addition to that, he would commit \$500,000 from a dedicated funding source to a streetscape project.

The Governor also promised that the Town would receive all kinds of assistance from state agencies. He created a task force consisting of members of his cabinet. The Governor's Deputy Chief of Staff was appointed to chair the task force. Included in the task force were the Secretary of the Office of Planning, Secretary of Transportation, Secretary of Business and Economic Development,

Secretary of Housing and Community Development, Secretary of the Department of the Environment and the Head of the Office of Smart Growth. State Senator Middleton, Delegate Van Mitchell, Murray Levy, President of the County Commissioners and Bill Eckman, Mayor of La Plata were also appointed to the Task Force. At the first meeting, in front of everyone, the Governor told the secretaries that he expected them to function as part of this task force, not just assign their subordinates to do it. The initial meeting of the task force was held on 5-7, just 9 days after the tornado occurred. All of the members were frequently in La Plata for the next few months. The really outstanding thing about their commitment was that it was a lasting one. When something like this happens, everyone wants to become a part of it, but they soon go away. The amazing thing was that they were still involved in La Plata's recovery a year later.

Obviously, the legislature had to buy in to the commitments the Governor had made or the money would not have been available. Both the Maryland Senate and House of Delegates budget committees made a field trip to La Plata during the first week. They endorsed the Governor's plan and the money was there when it was needed. In addition to the special appropriations committed to the tornado recovery, property owners in La Plata had access to low interest loans and all the programs administered by the Department of Business and Economic Development. They not only had access to those programs but the representatives on the scene were able to cut through the red tape and make them available with very little delay. They also interpreted the rules and regulations as liberally as possible in recognition of the special conditions that existed in La Plata in the aftermath of the tornado.

14. THE PEOPLE'S ROLE

The emphasis on rebuilding according to the Town's Vision Plan generated a lot of concern within the Town and rumors were rampant. Many of the business and property owners were afraid that the Town would not allow them to rebuild what they had before the tornado went through. Some thought they wouldn't be able to afford the type of buildings the Urban Design Plan recommended. A meeting was held at Casey Jones Restaurant and Pub in the center of the damaged area on that first Thursday evening. The Mayor assured the business owners that the Town would allow them to build back just what they had before if that is what they wanted to do. If the zoning and other regulations have changed since their building was originally built, the Town would waive various provisions or even change the Town Code if that is what it took to allow them to rebuild. The only two conditions that weren't negotiable were that the plans had to be signed by a registered architect and that the building would have to meet all the current building code requirements.

The Mayor also told them that if they decided to rebuild according to the Town's Vision Plan, they would get a lot of help.

1. The Town would assist the property owners in dealing with their insurance company if the adjusters objected to changing the foot print of the building or its location on the lot.
2. Storm water management regulations would be relaxed or waived.
3. Parking requirements would be relaxed, changed or actually waived in some situations.
4. The Town would assist the property owners to qualify for low interest loans.

5. Building permits and other fees would be waived.
6. Property owners would receive tax credits from both the Town and the County to counteract the increased value of the new buildings.
7. They would receive special incentive grants to cover the cost of a new foundation or relocating their buildings.

In return for all of these incentives, the property owners would be expected to work with the Town in developing a plan to rebuild in a way that was in accordance with the Town's Vision Plan. While there were some concerns expressed, the tone of the initial meeting was very positive. Everyone seemed willing to rebuild in a way that would make La Plata a better place to live, work and do business than it was before the tornado.

15. CLEANING UP

Before any rebuilding could begin, all the debris and rubble that was left behind by the tornado had to be cleared away. The responsibility for cleaning up and rebuilding single family homes would be on the homeowner and their insurance companies. The Town would furnish trucks and equipment to haul everything away, but it would be up to the property owners to provide the labor and oversee the removal of the rubble.

The Amish Community from St. Mary's County was a God send for the Town and the residents whose property was damaged or destroyed. They arrived on Monday morning and went through Town making temporary repairs to roofs that were damaged and windows that were broken. They adamantly refused to accept any compensation and were reluctant to depend on the Town for anything. They assembled every morning in front of the 7-11 on Charles Street and spread out from there. They did accept bottles of water and even ice cream after a hard days work. After it was

over, the townspeople wanted to do something for them to show them that they were really grateful for their help in the time of need. The Amish don't believe in insurance and none of them have health insurance. They finally agreed to accept a contribution to the fund they use to pay the medical bills when one of their people requires surgery or a hospital stay.

The Central Business District was a different story. Because of the size of the buildings and the number of them that were concentrated in a limited space, a more organized approach was needed. Before the serious cleanup could be done, a lot of preliminary work had to be completed. Roads and streets had to be cleared to gain access to the area. Utilities had to be rebuilt to provide electricity and telephone service. The transfer station had to be set up and ready to operate. Equipment and manpower had to be obtained. The Town and the County agreed that the first week would be used to prepare for the major cleanup. Next Monday morning, heavy machinery and trucks would start at one end of the business district and go through the storm damaged area, hauling all the debris to the transfer station as they went. Once that had been accomplished, rebuilding in earnest could begin.

On Wednesday morning, representatives from FEMA arrived and announced that they were there to take care of the cleanup. They said that the insurance companies were responsible for cleaning up the buildings they had insured. They also said that each property owner would have to separate wooden waste and hazardous materials from the remains of the buildings before it was hauled away. The Mayor and the President of the County Commissioners objected strongly to that approach. For one thing, the question would arise as to which insurance company was responsible for what. The remains of some buildings were scattered over a four block area. Would each property owner be responsible to go over the entire area, collect the remains of their buildings and haul them away? Or would individual

insurance companies be responsible to get rid of debris from other property owner's buildings that ended up on the property they had insured? And even if these questions could be resolved, cleaning up property by property would take all summer? The resources to do the job were available right then. The cleanup had already been scheduled to begin within the next week. Both the Mayor and the County Commission President were adamant that they intended to proceed as planned and to stay on schedule.

The next major problem occurred when the SHA Director of Operations met with the Town and the County to make arrangements for their part in the cleanup operation. He said that his equipment could not go on private property and that his crews would only take away debris that was on the public right of way. Again the Town and County objected to that and reiterated their intention to make a clean sweep of the business district. After some lively discussions, the SHA representative agreed to participate, with the understanding that all of the property owners would obtain written permission from their insurance company to remove what was left of the buildings they insured. This was done, and on Monday morning, one week after the tornado went through, 300 pieces of equipment and 600 workers began the cleanup. Everything went as planned and more than 90% of the debris had been removed from the downtown by noon on Friday when most of the crews left Town to return home. It was indeed a job well done in much less time than anyone expected.

16. A NEW VISION FOR LA PLATA

The urban design plan that had been adopted by the Town focused on creating a new Town Center north of Charles Street. The primary purpose of this Town Center would be to serve as a catalyst to create a better sense of community among residents of the Town. Most of the single family residences that have been built in recent years were in clearly defined subdivisions. New

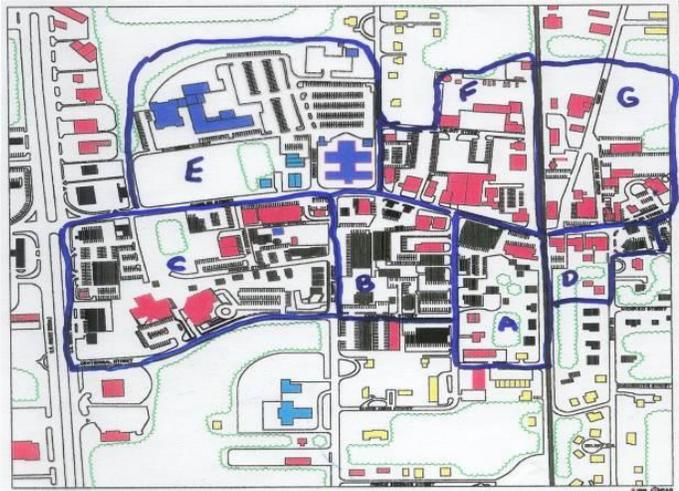
residents of the Town tended to identify with their neighborhood instead of the Town of La Plata. One of the primary goals of the urban design plan was to tie these scattered subdivisions into old town La Plata and the Central Business District.

Most of the buildings that were destroyed by the tornado were located south of Charles Street. Some of them were mixed use buildings with commercial occupancies on the first floor and residential on the second floor. Many of them were used as professional offices by doctors, lawyers, etc. Redevelopment of this area was included in the vision plan, but it was not scheduled to begin for at least ten years. The tornado changed all that.

Representatives from the Maryland Department of Planning (MDP) were part of the task force established by the Governor. They began to work with the Town immediately to develop a plan to modify the urban design plan that had been adopted to take advantage of the damage that had been done and begin its implementation with the rebuilding. MDP contacted the Washington Architectural Foundation (WAF) and requested their assistance in developing this plan. A volunteer team of architects and interns visited the Town and the planning effort got underway less than three weeks after the tornado hit La Plata.

When the WAF team arrived on Saturday morning, May 18, the Town furnished them with copies of both the Vision Plan and Urban Design Plan as they were adopted by the Town Council. The Mayor and several other members of the Town's Vision Implementation Team joined the WAF volunteers in forming a Planning Team to develop a plan for rebuilding in a way that would complement the goals and objectives of the Vision Plan for La Plata. Town officials then joined the WAF team in walking through the portion of the downtown that was damaged by the storm.

Figure 16-1 Storm Damaged Areas



The Central Business District was divided into six sub areas to begin the planning process. Figure 16-1 depicts the six areas. The Planning Team came to the conclusion that the damage was so extensive in three of them that the Town had what was virtually a blank sheet of paper to work with. These areas were designated A, B, and C. The

Town had set three primary goals to be accomplished by the Tornado Recovery effort in each of these sub areas:

1. Retain affected businesses
2. Preserve historic structures when possible
3. Rebuild in accordance with the Vision Plan and Urban Design Plan

On Saturday afternoon, the Planning Team met with the property owners and business people from the Central Business District. Each of the property owners was assigned to one of three groups, based on where their property was located. Members of the Planning Team met with each of the groups and facilitated an open discussion of the concerns of each of the business owners and their ideas of how the Town should be rebuilt in a way to enhance the operation of their business. The Team scheduled a follow-up workshop for the next Saturday where some preliminary plans for each of the three areas would be presented.

INITIAL PLAN

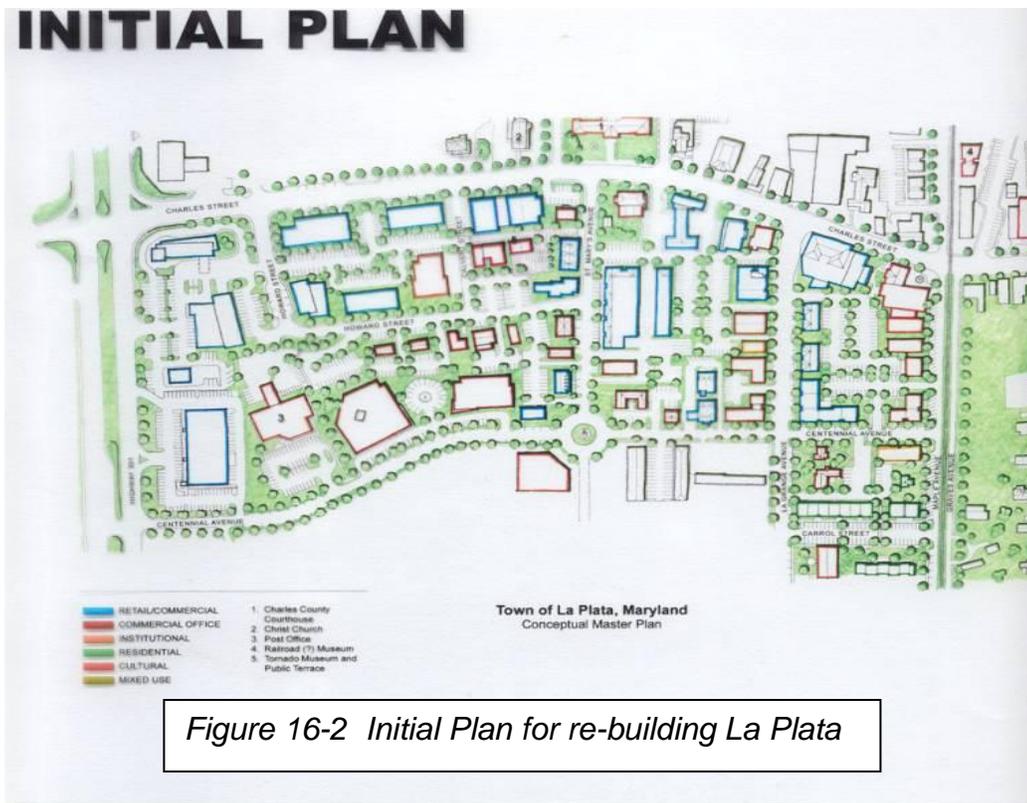


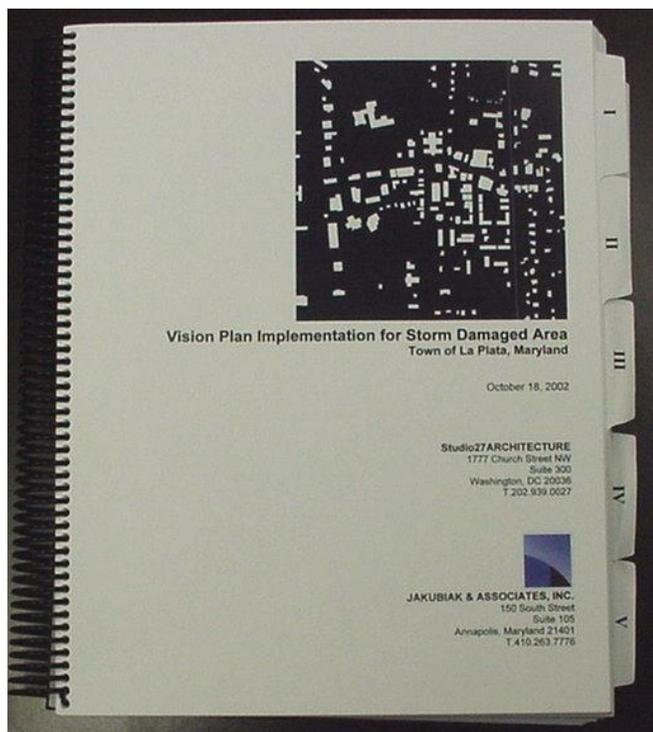
Figure 16-2 Initial Plan for re-building La Plata

There was one other participant of the Planning Team that proved to be very helpful. Immediately after the tornado struck, representatives from the Rural Development Agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture visited the Town to offer any assistance they could provide. The Town suggested that one of the primary needs was to conduct a market study to find out what types of businesses were likely to be the most successful in the damaged area and how the downtown should be rebuilt. USDA provided a

grant of \$50,000 and Jakubiak & Associates of Annapolis was hired to do a market study. The market study was completed and the consultant served as a member of the Planning Team. Later on, as the plan for rebuilding began to take shape, he and the leader of the WAF team met with each of the property owners and worked with them to decide how to rebuild in a way that would be to their advantage while complying with the overall vision plan for a new downtown.

As the plan began to materialize, the team met with individual property owners, small groups of adjoining property owners and as a group. This enabled the team to design a plan with joint parking arrangements and with buildings that were compatible with adjoining buildings. It also led to changing the entire streetscape in the areas to be rebuilt and create a uniform set back from the street. One of the big benefits was the way that parking was moved from the front of the buildings to the rear and the overall appearance of the streets.

Figure 16-3 Revised Vision Plan



On June 8th, just forty days after the tornado hit La Plata, the WAF team presented the Town with a plan for the area south of Charles Street that would be compatible with the Vision the Town had developed for the Town Center on the north side of the street. The initial plan is shown on Figure 16-2. The final plan for implementation of the revised vision plan shown in Figure 16-3, including the storm damaged area was delivered to the Town in October.

17. ROADBLOCKS IN THE WAY

As the planning team met with individual property owners, they kept running into certain roadblocks:

1. Insurance Company Policies: Initially, the planning team anticipated that some property owners would purchase adjacent properties to assemble larger tracts that could be redeveloped as mixed use buildings. Not many of the damaged properties changed hands because of insurance company policies. Most of the insurance policies were written to cover replacement cost. If that was the case, the insurance company would pay the full cost of rebuilding the building. If the property was sold and the building not replaced, the property owner only received the actual cash value, that is, the original cost less accumulated depreciation. That created a strong incentive for a property owner to replace the building instead of taking the insurance and selling the property.

The second problem was with relocating the building. Most insurance companies refuse to pay for the foundation or the pad the building was built on. They take the stance that the foundation is still there and doesn't have to be replaced. If the property owner changes the footprint of the building or moves it to a different location to satisfy the Town's Vision Plan, the insurance company won't pay the cost of building a new foundation or relocating the parking area. DBED initially provided the

Town with \$250,000 to use for incentive grants to compensate property owners for changing the location or footprint of their building to comply with the Town's Vision Plan. Later on, they provided additional funding when it became available.

2. Storm water regulations: MDE regulations required that the amount of impervious surfaces be reduced by 25% when property is redeveloped. One of the goals of the vision plan was to comply with MDE's Smart Growth initiative and increase the density, not reduce it. The Town negotiated with MDE and they agreed to consider the rebuilding as repairs rather than redevelopment and no additional storm water mitigation would be required because the property owner is complying with the Town's Vision Plan.
3. Parking limitations: The Town of La Plata's subdivision regulations and building codes required each property owner to have enough off street parking to accommodate their building. There was a provision that offsite parking could be credited, but the parking had to be within 300 feet of the building. In nearly every case, increasing the density would require additional parking. At the same time, enlarging the building generally reduced the portion of the lot that was available for parking. The Town approached this problem from several different angles. Since the goal of the Vision Plan was to create a walking downtown, the distance permitted for offsite parking was increased to 1000 feet. A provision was also added to allow the property owner to count on-street parking in front of the property. The Streetscape project will be designed to provide additional on street parking. With mixed use buildings, the regulations were also changed to allow the property owner to count a parking space twice, once for residential and the same space for commercial, since the normal time of use is different. Finally, the Town applied for grant

money to plan a structure to provide the additional parking spaces that would be needed when the Town Center is actually built.

4. Sewer System Limitations: Portions of the Town's sewer system had not been upgraded since it was originally built in 1955. There have been Sanitary Sewer Overflows from time to time and increasing the density in the downtown area would undoubtedly exacerbate this problem. The Town received a federal grant from EPA to build a relief line from Centennial Street to the Treatment Plant to overcome this problem. Later on, the sewer collection system was redesigned to accommodate the anticipated growth in the Town and a different approach was taken to providing for the increased sewage generated by the rebuilding of the downtown.

The Town charges a Major Facility Fee based on the amount of usage for any new construction or expansion of existing buildings. In order to encourage property owners to build larger buildings and high usage occupancies such as restaurants, the Town created an old town sewer district. No Major Facility Fees would be charged within this district when the new building would require additional sewer capacity.

5. Fees for building permits: The Town agreed to waive any permit fees for rebuilding buildings where they were destroyed or severely damaged by the tornado.
6. Increased taxes: There was some concern that increasing the size of the building would increase the amount of taxes the property owner would have to pay. This might create an intolerable burden considering the amount of loss the business owner would have to absorb from the time when his building was not available for business. Both the Town and the County agreed to phase in the increase in property taxes over a five year period.

6. Increased cost: Many of the buildings that were destroyed were paid for or had mortgages that were based on buildings that cost much less than their replacements. Insurance money would replace what they had, but not what the Vision Plan encourages the new building to be. Some of the small businesses were marginal before the storm and the increased mortgage payments might be too much for them to handle. DBED has low interest loans available for businesses that would create a certain number of jobs. They agreed to consider the rebuilding of La Plata as one project for purposes of eligibility for low interest loans and would make them available on an expedited basis to individual property owners.

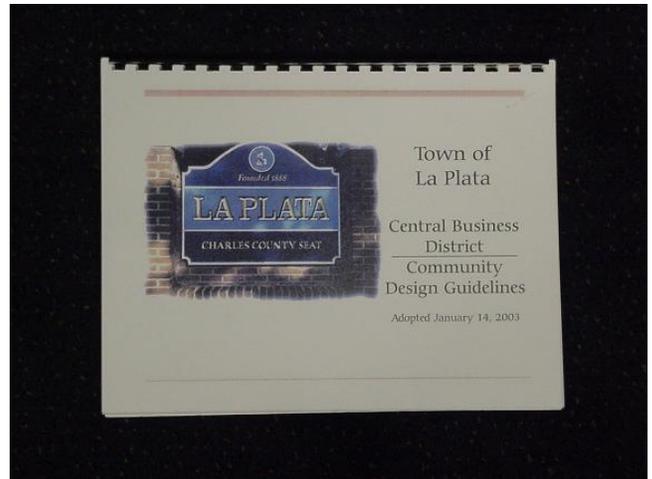
18. INCENTIVE GRANTS

The Town Council agreed from the start that they would not stand in the way of any property owners that wanted to replace their building just the way it was before the storm came through. On the other hand, the tornado presented an opportunity to accomplish some of the goals the Vision Plan had set for the Town. The Council agreed to implement all of the proposed incentives as a way to overcome the roadblocks that were being encountered. These incentives were to be used as tools to encourage property owners to rebuild according to the Vision Plan. One of the biggest issues was how to award the incentive grants to property owners who incurred additional costs in rebuilding.

The Vision Implementation Team had been working on a set of Design Guidelines for the Business District and had completed a draft copy. Along with the guidelines, the framework for a design review board had been developed. The design review board seemed to be the appropriate body to decide whether the plans for a building were in compliance with the Town's Vision Plan. They would also be the best ones to recommend to the Town Council whether the property owner was

eligible for an incentive grant and just how much the incentive grant should be.

Figure 18-1 Design Guidelines



The Maryland Department of Planning offered to put the design guidelines in final form and they were adopted by Mayor and Council. The ordinance creating the Design Review Board (DRB) was adopted and five members were appointed at the Council Meeting on May 14th. The DRB as it was established included an Architect, 2 business men, and two residents of the Town. This Board was given the responsibility of reviewing all plans for new buildings within the storm damaged area and making recommendations to the Town Council as to the amount of incentive grant each of them should receive. The Council had to approve these recommendations before the money could be dispersed. To be eligible for an incentive grant, the building had to meet the following criteria:

1. Must be in compliance with the Vision Plan.
2. Generally should comply with the design guidelines.
3. DRB must certify that these provisions are met and determine the amount of the grant.

- Incentive grant should cover the cost of moving the building, changing the foundation and relocating the parking area.

19. ZONING CHANGES

As the plans for rebuilding began to come in to the DRB for their review, it became obvious that there were some conflicts between the design guidelines and the zoning regulations of the Town. As an example, a bank and some real estate offices had been destroyed on the corner of Charles Street and Rt 301. The owner proposed to replace three buildings with a very imposing building that would be several times as large as the total square footage it replaced. This building would be located at the entrance to the Town's business district and was just what the Vision Plan recommended. The initial design included a drive in window at the same place the old bank had it, facing Charles Street.

Figure 19-1 Urban Highway Zone



The DRB objected to the location because the view of the building would be obscured by cars waiting in line to get to the drive in window instead of a nicely landscaped area. The problem was the fact that this building would be located in a highway commercial zone and the required setback was 45 feet from the property line. The property line at that location was actually more than 12 feet from the curb and following the

regulations meant that the building would actually be 60 feet from the road. Since that intersection was the entranceway to the Town's business district, a new urban highway zone was created for that general area that allowed a setback of only fifteen feet if the building met certain standards. As a result of this change, the drive-in window was moved to the other side of the building with access from the parking lot. A very nicely landscaped entrance now faces Charles Street instead of a line of cars waiting to go through the drive in lane. Figure 19-1 shows the first impression a person has of the Town when they enter La Plata from Rt. 301.

20. STREETScape PROJECT

The State of Maryland, under Governor Glendenning, created a Neighborhood Conservation program that was intended to improve the streetscape when a state highway went through a municipality. This included such things as building new sidewalks, new street lights and adding landscaping to mark the difference between a rural highway and what was often the main street of a Town. One of the main goals of La Plata's Vision Plan was to qualify for a Neighborhood Conservation Program to make Charles Street the main street of La Plata rather than just another section of State Route 6. This Highway was one of the major links between RT301 and Rt5, the primary highway entering St. Mary's County and much of the congestion in downtown La Plata was caused by through traffic. The State always received more requests for these projects than there was money to do them and La Plata was still waiting their turn to get started. The Governor made the commitment to fund a Neighborhood Conservation Program for La Plata outside the normal funding limitations with one major difference. These programs had always been limited to state highways. In the case of La Plata, the Governor agreed to extend the program to cover the entire area damaged by the tornado. In the end, most of the improvements that were made were on town streets, not state highways. The



Figure 20-1 Proposed Streetscape Program

Town’s Vision Plan included extending Centennial Street from La Grange Avenue to South Maple Avenue. The biggest problem in doing this was the fact that a historic house was in the way. That house was totally destroyed by the tornado. The Neighborhood Conservation Program paid for the required right of way and SHA built the street.

The normal approach for a Neighborhood Conservation Program was to gather a team consisting of residents of the Town, SHA staff and a firm of consultants. This team usually spent about 18 months deciding what the street should look like and designing the improvements. A streetscape team was appointed within the first two weeks and began work on an expedited basis so that the streets could be rebuilt in conformance to the streetscape design that was adopted by the

Town. Instead of 18 months, the work was completed in less than six months. Fig. 20-1 shows the final plan for the streetscape in La Plata, including the entire storm damaged area and not just the state highways

The Streetscape project as it was approved was planned to be built in four phases. The initial phase was to rebuild the heart of the damaged area focusing on La Grange Avenue, Centennial Street and Maple Avenue. The second phase would cover Charles Street. The next phase would improve St. Mary’s Avenue and the final phase would rebuild Oak Avenue and other streets that were not as severely damaged

While it was not part of the Streetscape project, SHA came into Town within the first three weeks after the tornado and installed new sidewalks on

Charles Street in several areas. They also made some major improvements to Rt 301 in the area that was damaged. The major improvement was rebuilding the intersection of Rt 301 and Rt 6 including crosswalks and walk lights for pedestrian crossings. The Town had been trying to get the state to build a crossover on Rt 301 at the Centennial Street intersection. That was done as part of this project.

Figure 20-2 Old Streetscape on La Grange Avenue



Figure 20-3 New Streetscape on La Grange Avenue



21. FINANCING THE RECOVERY

The Town received a lot of financial help from a number of different sources. Within the first few days the County provided \$150,000 and the State donated \$100,000 to take care of the immediate expenses. Neither of these grants were designated for any particular purpose and they were used to cover the initial costs associated with the cleanup of the Town. One place they were used was to pay bills for lodging, meals, fuel and other expenses for the volunteer help that came from all over the state.

The biggest contributions came from the State of Maryland. The Governor committed a total of \$1,400,000 immediately to help the Town rebuild according to its Vision Plan. The Town had the opportunity to purchase one of the buildings that was damaged by the tornado. The State contributed \$400,000 toward rebuilding it as a combination storm shelter, police station and community center. In addition to the cash contributions, all of the State Agencies were there to provide help when it was needed. MDP arranged for the Washington Architectural Foundation to develop a plan for rebuilding at no cost to the Town. MDP also developed and printed the design guidelines for the Town as well as providing other technical assistance. The Office of Smart Growth provided a coordinator who worked just about full time providing an interface with various agencies for more than a year. Low interest loans were made by DBED from existing funds normally used for economic development throughout the state. The Governor originally committed \$500,000 for the Neighborhood Conservation Program from dedicated funds. The state of Maryland actually spent over \$1,500,000 on this project. The State also assumed responsibility for disposing of the debris that was created by the storm. This cost the State more than \$2,500,000.

The Federal Government was also there when it was needed. Through the auspices of Congressman Hoyer's office, the Town received a \$1,000,000 grant to replace the water tower that was destroyed and make other infrastructure improvements that were needed as part of the recovery effort. USDA provided a \$50,000 grant to pay for an economic development plan for rebuilding the central business district. When the Town ran short of funds for the new police station and community center, Senator Mikulski arranged for a \$150,000 grant to make up the difference.

Twenty seven different Counties, Cities and Towns sent workers and equipment to help with the cleanup. The Town paid the direct expenses of the workers and fuel for their vehicles, but none of the jurisdictions received any reimbursement for salaries or their other costs. There was some thought that FEMA would reimburse them for their actual expenses. While FEMA would have paid for hiring workers and equipment, they refused to pay anything toward the help the Town received on a volunteer basis. They based their refusal on the fact that the Town did not have a formal mutual aid agreement with any of these entities and FEMA said that they weren't required to come to the aid of La Plata. Since they were not required to do it, FEMA considered it a volunteer action and they don't pay volunteers.

Finally, all types of organizations and entities made contributions toward the recovery. These ranged from the Petroleum Dealers of Maryland who contributed \$25,000 to Robin Hill nursery who contributed 100 trees to replace those that were destroyed by the tornado. The Facchina Group made a major contribution by subsidizing the rent in the temporary town center for businesses that couldn't afford to pay it themselves.

22. AFTER THE STORM

Two years after the storm, the damaged area was vibrant and full of life. The school that was

destroyed was housed in temporary buildings initially and was able to open on schedule in the fall. During that year, a new building was built and opened the following year. The church that lost its second story was rebuilt within a year and its activities continued as before.

Figure 22-1 One new building replacing three

BEFORE



AFTER



All but four single family dwellings were repaired or replaced within two years. Two of them were sold and commercial buildings built in their place. Fourteen of the commercial buildings were not rebuilt, but in several cases, three or four buildings were replaced with one new building. Figure 22-1 is an example of a case where four small buildings were replaced with one large commercial building.

This is typical of the improvements that were made

Fifteen businesses were relocated or closed. On the other hand, 25 new businesses were opened in the storm damaged area within the first two years.. As a result of all the activity, a number of new businesses were opened outside the storm damaged area as well.

After six years, there were still five buildings that were not rebuilt, but replacements for many of them are in the planning stages. There was a lot of infill development and there are at least twice as many businesses operating in the La Plata Central Business District as there were before the storm. All of the buildings that have been built have met the criteria in the Design Guidelines and on the average, new buildings have an assessed valuation of more than twice the value of the ones that were destroyed by the storm.

A lot of improvements have been made to the Town infrastructure during the recovery. The old 75,000 gallon water tank has been replaced with a new 700,000 gallon tank. Some major upgrades to the sewer system have been made or are in the planning stages. A new police station/community center has been constructed. Traffic patterns are greatly improved by the addition of Centennial Street extended, the new intersection configuration at Rt301 and Charles Street and the added crossover on Rt 301 at Centennial Street. Sidewalks have been added throughout much of the downtown area where none existed before.

Probably the most important thing is the attitude of the community. The Town once again has demonstrated that it has the ability to recover from a horrendous natural disaster. Even more important, there is a general feeling in the community that the Vision Plan that so many people invested their time and efforts in creating is not just “pie in the sky” but a living, breathing plan that can be used to make the Town a much better place to live.

23. LESSONS LEARNED

The most important thing that came out of this experience was the need to maintain relationships with other agencies and levels of government. The Mayor and the President of the County Commissioners had been meeting on a regular basis for several years. These meetings were not for any particular purpose, but were used to keep each other informed as to what was happening in the Town and the County and how they related to each other. That relationship served both the County and the Town well when the tornado came through.

This event clearly showed that the need to maintain a close relationship extends beyond the Town and the County. The avalanche of help that was received from other municipalities across the state of Maryland was primarily because of the relationship between the Mayor, the Town Council and the Town Manager of La Plata and other municipal officials. Other municipalities would have helped anyway, but the personal relationships that existed raised the amount of help that was received to another level. The Town’s relationship with Maryland Municipal League staff also was important. When they offered to help coordinate the offers of aid that were being received, Town officials had confidence in their ability and were willing to trust them to perform a vital role in assembling the resources that were needed to recover from the tornado.

The role the Mayor and Town Manager of La Plata played in the Rt 301 south task force and the project oversight committee was of vital importance to developing a plan for recovery. The number of meetings that were held with state officials, extending to the Governor himself, made them aware of La Plata’s Vision Plan and led the Governor to provide the resources to enable the Town to rebuild according to its Vision Plan. The familiarity that the Town officials and staff had developed with the various state agencies made it

much easier to work with them and to identify where the help that was needed could be found.

The second important factor in the Town's recovery was the agreement between the Town and the County as to which agency would be responsible for each facet of the recovery. This agreement should be based on which agency is best able to cope with a particular situation and political considerations have no place in the negotiations. An early agreement on assigning responsibilities eliminated duplication of effort and allowed both the Town and the County to concentrate on their particular area of responsibility. This agreement should be reached as soon as possible. Once agreement has been reached and a plan of action prepared, everyone should work together to implement the plan. If changes are required as the work progresses, everyone should reach agreement quickly and continue according to the revised plan.

A third factor that contributed to the success of this effort was the presence onsite of officials that were at a high enough level in the governmental structure to make decisions and to see that things happened. Their willingness to make decisions and stick with them was critical to the recovery and rebuilding. Along with that was the fact that these officials stayed involved until the recovery was complete.

The demands that are placed on local officials during an event of this magnitude make it difficult to keep things in perspective. One thing that frequently suffers is keeping a good record of what is happening. One of the first things the Mayor did was arrange for a person to do nothing but keep detailed records. It was the Town's intention to hire this person as a part time employee, but she refused to accept any compensation. She became one of the multitudes of volunteers that made the recovery successful.

Finally, the most important lesson that was learned was that people will be there when they are

needed if they are aware of what is happening. Early on, Town Officials were warned that there would be a honeymoon of about a month. Experience has shown that after three or four weeks, people begin to get impatient. They get angry, are very critical and reluctant to work with local officials in rebuilding in line with the plan. That never happened in La Plata. The primary reason morale was so high in a very difficult situation was the fact that the Town maintained an open communication policy and "told it like it was". The Mayor and Council made every effort to keep everyone informed about the revised Vision Plan, what progress was being made in implementing it and what they could expect as the rebuilding progressed. Considering the fact that the cable TV system was out, there was no electricity in the damaged area and telephone service was overloaded, it was difficult to accomplish this. Town officials worked closely with the media, especially with the local newspapers. One of the most popular radio talk shows set up their equipment in the middle of the damaged area and put on their program live from La Plata. Frequent informal meetings were held in various locations in the community. Newsletters and flyers were prepared and delivered by hand. When it was all said and done, the personal contact between the Mayor, Town Council, Town employees and the people was the most effective way to keep them informed about what to expect.

The Mayor was walking through a storm damaged neighborhood early one morning. There was an elderly woman sitting on her porch. When he asked her how she was doing, her reply was "Oh, we're doing all right". This woman was sitting on the porch of a house with the roof destroyed, no electricity, no cable TV, no telephone, getting her meals from a canteen at the end of the street, but she still was doing all right. This was just one example of the way people in La Plata reacted to this situation and was typical of the attitude most of them displayed.

24. PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Events of this magnitude happen so rarely that most governments aren't prepared for them when they do. There has been a lot of emphasis on developing emergency plans since the events of 9-11 and the increase in terrorism around the world as well as natural catastrophes that have occurred in recent years. It has been the Town's experience that detailed plans have a limited amount of value. Each event is so unique, that it is difficult to prepare a detailed plan that fits all situations. On the other hand, the Town has done a number of things to get ready for the next one.

There was a problem letting people know that the tornado was coming and that they needed to take shelter before it hit. Most public places in La Plata now have radio alert receivers to provide an early warning that a tornado is coming. Arrangements have also been made with the local Cable TV Company to transmit a warning to all TV sets that are turned on when the National Weather Bureau calls for a tornado watch or tornado warning.

Figure 24-1 Tornado warning siren



Immediately after the tornado went through, one of the companies that specialized in warning devices installed a siren in the center of Town as a demonstration project shown in Figure 24-1. The County Communications Center controls this siren. It not only includes a warning siren, but the County Communications Center can communicate a verbal warning over a speaker system to provide

detailed information on what type of danger is imminent. After a number of tests, the Town installed another five sirens to provide coverage throughout the Town. These sirens are all solar powered and will continue to operate even if the electric system is destroyed. In the future, developers will be required to add sirens as needed as part of the infrastructure when new subdivisions are in the planning stages.

Figure 24-2 Police Station and shelter



One of the most dangerous places to be when a tornado strikes is in an automobile. The warning sirens will make motorists coming through Town aware of the danger, but there needs to be some place for them to take shelter. As part of the recovery from the 2002 tornado, the Town decided to convert a vacant building in the center of Town, just about a block from the new Town Hall, to a police station. A community meeting room was included in the police station and the decision was made to harden that portion of the building to withstand 170 mph winds and projectiles up to 110 mph. That room was also equipped as an Emergency Operations Center that could be used by the Town to coordinate the efforts of the emergency services and the Town forces during major events. It can also serve as a backup to the County EOC after the immediate danger has passed.

25. BLESSING IN DISGUISE

The Town spent the previous four years creating a Vision for the future of the greater La Plata Area and developing a plan to make it happen. It had been hampered by a lack of funding in carrying through on the implementation plan. The tornado of 2002 offered an opportunity to accelerate the process and opened a number of avenues to provide the funding to get started that was previously unavailable.

From a standpoint of benefits to the Maryland State Government, implementation of La Plata's Vision Plan in the recovery from the tornado presented an opportunity to apply Smart Growth principles to a revitalization area on an accelerated basis. Much of the infrastructure in the damaged area was old and in need of replacement. Rebuilding after the tornado enabled the Town to replace outmoded infrastructure and expand it to better serve the Town as it continues to grow.

The 75,000 gallon elevated water tank has been replaced with a 750,000 gallon ground level tank with booster pumps that maintain a good operating pressure throughout the Town. Another 250,000 gallon elevated tank and a new well were added in connection with an annexation in the northern end of Town.

Figure 26-1 750,000 gallon water tank



The sewer system has been upgraded to provide the capacity that will be needed as the Town builds out. One of the 55 year old pump stations and associated force mains has been eliminated and the other has been replaced by a new station that has more than five times as much capacity as the original pumps. Sanitary Sewer Overflows from the sewage collection system have been virtually eliminated.

Figure 16-2 Willow Lane pump station



A new Town Hall was built in the center of Town, as the Vision Plan recommended, to bring more focus on the area that was rebuilt after the tornado. In addition to these new facilities, the Town purchased a new public works building on Crain Highway that provides better access to the center of Town and includes a modern repair facility for Town vehicles and equipment. The Town's Wastewater Treatment Plant is in the process of being modernized and modified to meet ENR standards.

In summary, this natural disaster provided an opportunity to deal with "the sins of the past" and "build for the future". Ten years later, La Plata is undoubtedly a better place to live than it was before the storm passed by.

TORNADOS IMPACT ON MAYOR'S WIFE

In 2002, we lived about one block from the Town Hall and three blocks from the center of Town. After the tornado struck La Plata on April 28, 2002, my life was greatly impacted as wife of the mayor of La Plata. I saw very little of him for the week following, as he left home at 5am and came home by 10 or 11pm, falling into bed after a bowl of cereal. How was I to know, and he didn't think to tell me, that some of the restaurants, fast food places and a number of organizations and service groups provided food for anyone and everyone during those early days.

While I was concerned about his exhaustion and not eating properly, I had my own problems to deal with. I was recovering from surgery, whereby a stitched nerve gave me great pain down my leg and ankle, thus causing a hectic time answering the phone. The Town Hall phone was out of order for two days and the mayor's home phone number was listed in many directories.

Then the phone calls began. Our son Jeff couldn't get into town for several days to check on us, but he and my friend Eileen kept me somewhat informed by daily phone calls of the damage that had occurred. My TV was out for five days and without it I couldn't even imagine such devastation. Then came the persistent phone calls from the TV and radio stations, many wanting interviews with the mayor. They came from Washington, DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Ocean City and other places. I gave them the mayor's cell phone number, but it was not working properly and they never got through to him

My husband's connection thru fire training and consulting, had fire companies calling from as far away as South Carolina and New Jersey, many offering to send equipment and men to help clean up. Long distance family members and friends were calling to see if we were OK, and my friend Cis took me for groceries when roads were cleared.

On the night of the tornado, I had 15 phone calls; on Monday 38; Tuesday, 22; Wed., 11; Thur.,8; and Friday 10. That's 104 calls in six days. Friday night I was admitted to Civista for 3 days, from what else...isolation syndrome and stress!

Eventually everything settled down, but the memories of all the great caring people who responded to the Town of La Plata, to the Mayor's need, and to mine, will stay with me forever.

Dolores Eckman, former first lady of La Plata