



Message from Queen's Park



Monthly Column by MPP John Yakabuski

August 18, 2006

On the evening of Wednesday August 2nd, the Combermere area was struck by the devastating force of a F2 Tornado, the strongest one to hit anywhere in Ontario this year.

It happened at the end of the end of the summer's worst heat wave where temperatures reached the high 30's. In fact on August 1st, Ontario set a new record for electricity demand at 27,005 mw, eclipsing the previous record by a whopping 845 mw. This number is a clear indication that the government must ensure that there is enough generation capacity in place to provide the energy needed at times of peak demand, something that the McGuinty government falls short on.

Back to Combermere. Vicky and I first witnessed the severity of the damage shortly after 7:00 am on Thursday. Plain and simply put, UNBELIEVABLE. It was clear that this would be a major challenge for the Municipality and its resources. The most amazing news that morning was the revelation that no lives had been lost as a result of the disaster. Truly miraculous given the number of people in the tornadoes path.

By the time I had arrived much work had already been done to make roads passable and to ascertain the good news that there were no fatalities. Township road crews, firefighters and volunteers had worked through the night to ensure this. Township Reeve John Hildebrandt had declared a State of Emergency allowing the municipality to deal with the crisis as quickly and effectively as possible.

A bit of irony here. Our eldest son, Zachary, who is working in Lake St. Peter Provincial Park, was speaking to Vicky early in the evening on the Wednesday of the tragedy. He remarked to her how he thought the sky looked eerily similar to the sky the day that the

tornado struck Halfway Lake (Zac was working in Halfway Lake Provincial Park when it was levelled by a tornado in 2002).

What happened over the next several days in and around Combermere was as heart-warming as the tornado was devastating. The way the people all came together as community will be a lasting memory arising out of the mess and mayhem. As the news began to filter out, people began to show up ready to do whatever they could to help. They came with chainsaws prepared to tackle the job. They came with food to supply those whose homes were out of power and inaccessible. They came to offer assistance to those most affected. They came from neighbouring townships, from neighbouring counties and even from the Mennonite Communities in Southern Ontario.

With all the help and offers of help, supplies and provisions comes the challenge of co-ordinating and directing these services. That task becomes the responsibility of the municipality, its officials and employees. While an emergency plan had been prepared and tabled, you don't get to practice until the real thing comes along. Given the fact that we got hit with a whopper, I must give full marks to the township for its calm leadership ensuring that the recovery operation was conducted in a most professional and efficient manner.

In speaking to a Hydro One official, he also said that the co-ordination of the clean up and recovery was among the best he had ever been involved in.

What about our Hydro One crews. I would be remiss if I did not recognize the tremendous efforts they made to restore power under extreme circumstances. With the help of crews from outside, including Pembroke and Ottawa, all but a few had power back on by Sunday night. I was briefed at least twice a day as to the state of restoration and this was very helpful as people were wondering when they might have their power back on.

Last week Glen Gulick took me up in his plane to view the path of the tornado from the air. This again was very helpful. Being able to follow it's path gave me a clearer picture of the whole situation. From the air you can see that it first touched down near Papineau

Lake and followed a basically straight line rising and touching down through Combermere and ending at Diamond Lake.

One thing that should be noted is the fact that what was already a very difficult clean up relief and recovery operation would have been made exponentially worse if the Combermere area did not have recently acquired cell phone service. Seamless cell phone service throughout the highway corridors of Renfrew County is something I have been pressing for since my election. Disastrous events such as the tornado of 2006 only reinforce the reality of the need of today and will serve to galvanize my efforts to achieve this goal. The ability for all those involved in the co-ordination of this process to communicate on an immediate basis the ever-changing needs and demands of the operation, was absolutely essential for its smooth running. Government and major cell service providers take note of that.

The Combermere Tornado's legacy will be two fold. The loss and pain experienced by people, the devastation to property and landscape will change its face for generations to come. On the flip side, the face of the great character of the people of the Valley manifested itself in spades. To all those who helped in any way, thank you. For the sparing of lives, thank God.

Office Contact Information:

Constituency Office
84 Isabella St.
Pembroke, ON
K8A 5S5
(613) 735-6627
john.yakabusko@pc.ola.org

Queen's Park Office
Room 202 N.W., Legislative Building
Toronto, ON
M7A 1A8
(416) 325-2170
john.yakabuski@pc.ola.org