

Archives 2013.039.0002

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
HOBOKEN STORIES:
REMEMBERING STORM SANDY

INTERVIEWEE: FIRE CHIEF RICHARD BLOHM
INTERVIEWER: CHRISTINA ZIEGLER-McPHERSON
DATE: 19 AUGUST 2013

CZ: This is Richard Blohm, Fire Chief, Hoboken Fire Department, August 19, 2013, and the interviewer is Christina Ziegler-McPherson. Chief, thank you so much for your time.

RB: You're very welcome.

CZ: Just some background -- if you could tell me how long you've been the fire chief; what you did before you got this position; how long you've been in Hoboken.

RB: Well, I wear a multitude of hats. I've been the fire chief, officially sworn in as the fire chief, in 2009, and was the acting fire chief in 2008. I've been a

deputy fire chief since 1992, and I've been on the fire department since 1977 -- over thirty-five years. I'm also an instructor for the International Association of Firefighters. They fly me around the country on federal grant monies. I take vacation from here to do that. And I train firefighters in hazard-material response, weapons of mass destruction. I'm also a part-time instructor up at the Bergen County Law & Public Safety Institute, training recruit firefighters up there, as well.

CZ: The other thing I was wondering is, how many full-time fire personnel does Hoboken have?

RB: Currently we have a table of organization that, if it were full (it's not; we're short a couple of people at the moment) would be 105 personnel, in uniform.

CZ: Is that full-time?

RB: Yes.

CZ: And part-time?

RB: We have no part-time uniform people. We have some civilians who are part-time fire prevention inspectors. Two of those. Then we have non-uniformed civilian fire dispatchers, and two administrative assistants -- one you met outside -- and one that works up in fire prevention, as well,

CZ: Great. So the purpose of this interview is to recollect your memories of Hurricane Sandy, since the anniversary is coming up. I wanted to ask you when you first heard about Hurricane Sandy, when that term first came to you; when you first heard it.

RB: I'm not quite sure what you mean by the question.

CZ: When did you first hear that the hurricane was coming?

RB: Well, we'd gotten a number of updated reports from the state's emergency management center. Additionally, there were some folks up at Stevens Institute who measure the tidal basin on a regular basis, and they were giving the mayor and key folks in both emergency and

non-emergency capacities that information, on more than a daily basis. Probably hourly, sometimes.

CZ: So where did you first hear that this big storm was coming? Was it from the mayor's office? Was it from Stevens? Some other weather service somewhere else?

RB: Well, the weather service, the State Office of Emergency Management, the governor -- just about every entity in not only the state, but on a federal level in some instances, were making everybody aware that this storm was going to be one of those perfect storms, so to speak. The mayor called for an emergency meeting of the police chief; myself; the business administrator; the assistant business administrator; all the directors, to kind of start to formulate a plan on what we would do.

You have to remember that a year before that we had Hurricane Irene, which was almost a non-event. But based upon that year before emergency, we started to take the same precautionary measures, to gear up the individuals who would be necessary in the event that we did have this storm.

CZ: About when was that? Was that two days before? A week before?

RB: I would say within the first seven days prior to that event is when we started to get some semblance of an idea that there was going to be a storm that had the potential to hit right into New Jersey. At that point in time, it was even difficult for the forecasters to determine exactly where it was going to cause the most damage.

CZ: What was your expectation that last week of October, before the storm arrived? Did you have any thoughts about what you could expect the storm would look like?

RB: Well, I was running through my head some of the things that we had done in the previous year, as I said. For Hurricane Irene, we had gotten a couple of buses, at 11:30 at night, for Hurricane Irene, and started going around with public-address systems, asking people who wanted to voluntarily evacuate, that these buses were here. We went block by block, trying to get some folks to leave their homes, just in the event that it was a very severe

storm. There weren't many people who left their homes. I guess they were afraid to do so.

So I started kind of a Rolodex in your head, thinking of some of the precautionary things that needed to be done, which included our firefighters and fire officers making sure they had spare radio batteries; their chargers; make sure our emergency backup generators were working. They had all their bedding and everything if, indeed, we have to evacuate. It was ready to go within a twenty-minute time frame. That was the benchmark I thought we would get, a twenty-minute -- "Hey, you have to get out of your firehouse now." Unfortunately, that's not how it turned out, but that's what we were thinking at the time.

CZ: I'm curious, because you mentioned Hurricane Irene, about the planning that the fire department had done for a major storm, before October 29, 2012. If you could tell me some of the things you guys have done, besides checking equipment and things; other kinds of plans that you've done.

RB: Sure. We were discussing exactly what our manpower needs would be. In any emergency, you're going to need additional manpower; plus, you have to be concerned

about -- you can't wait until the last minute to call those folks in, because maybe they can't get in. So we were thinking about what, in terms of overtime, what those costs would be, based upon my estimations with regard to what I thought would be an appropriate amount of personnel that would already be here when that emergency occurred. We also looked -- in Hurricane Irene, we purchased five inflatable Zodiac boats that weren't needed then, but, certainly, they were used during Hurricane Sandy, so we made sure they were working properly, as well. Because even though our fire apparatus are fairly large pieces of apparatus -- even the National Guard, when they were in -- once the water got over thirty-six inches, the water would go into the exhaust pipes of those vehicles -- because they're side-mounted, instead of vertically-mounted, like trucks would be. If water got in there, the engines basically drowned. So even the National Guard vehicles couldn't get anywhere over thirty-six inches of standing water, and we had quite a bit more than that.

I'll give you an example of one. They had a medical call down at the Housing Authority. It was a woman in a wheelchair. They went in behind a National Guard vehicle. When they couldn't go any further, they got out of the fire engine, threw the Zodiac boat into -- they call it

the "doose and a half," the truck that the National Guard was using -- and they got into that. They went a little bit further; they couldn't go anymore. The firefighters got out of the truck, put the boat in the water; they rowed -- because the water kept getting deeper; then the water got shallow again, and they had to get out of the boat, drag the boat behind them; the water got deep again; they had to get back in the boat and row to this woman who was waiting to be evacuated, for medical reasons.

They put her in the boat; they put her wheelchair in the boat; they got in the boat; turned around; started rowing out; when the water got too shallow, they carried her; carried her wheelchair; dragged the boat. When the water got deeper again, they put her back in the boat, her wheelchair back in the boat. They got back in the boat, and rowed the rest of the way out, to the National Guard. That was one call. We had 938 calls in ten days.

CZ: So what kind of drills or simulations do you do at the fire department, to prepare for these kinds of events?

RB: We train every day. In the morning, between either 10:00 to 11:30 or 12:00, or 10:30 to 12:30.

Then they go back for lunch, to get a little bit of a break. Then about 1:00 to 3:00, or 1:30 to 3:30 in the afternoon. Then they're required, for eight hours at a minimum, to do night training, as well, in the course of a year. Each individual.

So we're constantly training. Every opportunity we get, we send our firefighters to go get trained at academies, or we bring instructors into the town. For example, we're going to be doing that -- I wrote a grant for training eighty of our firefighters to become what they call safety officers, and eighty of them to be trained as emergency vehicle driver/operators, according to the National Fire Protection Association standards. That was all through a federal grant. We're going to bring those instructors here.

CZ: I'm wondering about the coordination between the fire department and City Hall, when Hurricane Sandy started to happen, basically that Monday afternoon and night -- if you could tell me about how you [unclear] City Hall. How did that work?

RB: Well, every several hours the mayor would call for an emergency meeting. In some instances, we

had conference calls with the folks up at Stevens -- what their latest projections were going to be with regard to the storm surge -- which is kind of different than the storm itself. We also had all the different agencies there, whether it was the police department liaison folks; whether it was Chief Falco or one of his representatives. We had Director Pellegrini, who was there; Quentin Wiest. Literally, we all slept -- I slept in my car, outside City Hall, for three days, just to get a couple of hours sleep. I put an extra eighty hours in that one week, in addition to my normal hours. There was just no sense going anywhere; you couldn't get anywhere, anyway, and the community needed us. In thirty-five years, that was probably the worst emergency I've ever encountered, whether it came to blizzards or anything else. It literally paralyzed this community, and there was just no way that I could leave. There were just too many demands, not only on the fire department -- the police department, public works folks were tremendous in the aftermath, cleaning up all that garbage that people were throwing out. My god! There was just so much. And the mayor was kind of the fiduciary head, if you will, or titular head, of the organization. At one point I brought to their attention that there is something called an Incident Management System, that really should be

put into effect. There are two different ways to do that. You can have single command or unified command, where you have a representative from every agency, that has the authority to act for that agency. For example, it wouldn't make any sense if I had to ask for two dump trucks of sand, of the representative from Environmental Services there, if that individual said, "Well, I'll have to call Director Pellegrini." Well, then we don't need you there; we need Director Pellegrini there, who can make that decision in the moment.

And based upon the weather reports, based upon the conditions in the town, we kept having these meetings for several days, literally. The mayor was even [unclear] in some instances, where she didn't get back home until 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. We had to literally raid the Shoprite, because in the first two or three days, even people who had volunteered their time -- and let's not let those folks go unsung. The CERT team was absolutely essential to this community. They did a tremendous job in alleviating some of the lesser tasks from emergency services, so we could be out there, trying to get to the folks; and the volunteering of walking up cases of water into senior-citizen buildings. It's one thing to have emergency power, but it doesn't provide elevator power. So

in senior buildings, they can't walk down fifteen flights of stairs, and then they're going to carry up a case of water? So the CERT teams were absolutely essential in assisting this community, and I don't think they get enough accolades for what they did.

But there was no food. All the restaurants were closed. We were keeping people over. We had no way of feeding them. So I sent a couple of fire engines down to the Shoprite, and the manager was in there trying to keep the water out. Well, we had a meeting of the minds, and he said, "Just come in and take whatever you need." We literally -- granola bars; juices; canned goods; soup and beans; you name it; packaged goods. We'd throw it up on top of the fire engines. He was keeping track, as we left [unclear], of course. But it was amazing how the community came together in its time of need.

One of the trepidations I had through that whole event was I was deathly afraid we were going to find there were some people who had died, that we just hadn't gotten to. Luckily, that was not the case. We were very, very fortunate. Think about the magnitude of that emergency, the magnitude of that emergency, and nobody lost their life. And how the community came together with pizza pies, and cooking, when they finally got some power back.

"Bring it to the fire stations." People were donating clothes. The doctors were doing a great job, making sure that prescriptions were being taken care of. They did a great job.

CZ: I was wondering where were you Monday night, when the storm happened, and the water really started to come in.

RB: That's a funny story. As I mentioned earlier, we had made a decision. I told all the folks who were on duty, "I want you to have everything ready to go," so if we had to abandon any of our fire stations, within a twenty-minute notice, you didn't have to be thinking about what you needed -- including our dispatchers, who are located on the third floor, here. We made arrangements to forward all our emergency calls to North Hudson. Fire and Rescue -- they were very, very helpful. Eventually, we sent a couple of our dispatchers up there, and they actually dispatched our fire companies from North Hudson. It was strictly just one phone call to take care of that.

But I'll never forget -- I was getting ready to walk back into fire headquarters here -- the same door you came in -- and Director "Took," [phonetic] the public

safety director, called me up and he said, "Chief, we're getting some reports of water down in your area. I think it's time to think about evacuating the firehouses down there." I looked down at the ground, and I said, "Director, there's not a drop of water in the street. I'm literally standing outside of fire headquarters." He goes, "Well, okay."

Now, in a light rain, in this area, we get some flooding. There wasn't a drop of water. I walked in the door, I walked up five of the same steps you came up, and the phone rang again. It was Mayor Zimmer. She said, "Chief, the water has come over the sea wall. You need to think about getting your firefighters out of there." I said, "Mayor, I just got off the phone with the public safety director, and there isn't a drop of water outside." And I looked out the window, on the set of stairs, and the water was about a foot deep -- in literally ten seconds. I said, "Mayor, I have to go." I hung up, I ran upstairs to the third floor, I told the dispatchers, "Get all the paperwork and books you need, and get out of the building now." I went over to fire prevention, I told them the same thing. By the time I ran backstairs to get my vehicle, the water was up over my calves.

I went down Second Street, west, away from the firehouse, and came up against the traffic and went down Jefferson Street. I waited, and I watched as our other guys got out. My fire marshal, instead of following the same direction I did -- he made a left onto Jefferson Street, he got halfway down the block, and then the vehicle lost traction in the ground and it was floating in the water. This is in a *minute*. A fire truck came by, and on the radio said to him, "Cap, get out of the vehicle now; otherwise, we're going to have to leave you, because we're going to stall out." He opened the door, and the entire vehicle flooded with water. He waded from his hips over to that truck, and got out. While I was out in front of Jefferson Street, I started to see the water on Third Street starting to fill in down there. I had to pull out, and I drove up Third.

So I would say that in a matter of five minutes, max, this fire house here on Second and Jefferson Street, and the one on Observer Highway -- and it was appropriately called that "lull before the storm" -- it's called "the Island," is the nickname -- and if you see some of the photos (I can show you one of them), it literally looks like an island a couple of days after the storm surge, surrounded by water.

So in five minutes we lost two of our firehouses, including our backup generators in both of these fire stations. Now our repeater, which is our communications capability -- when you see a firefighter or a fire officer key their microphone, on their walkie-talkie, it sends a signal up to Stevens Institute, picks that up, amplifies it, and sends it back through the town. Because it's the highest point in town.

Well, when the power went out their backup generator didn't come on. We had no power. I could not communicate with one fire truck in the town. None. We had to send our fire-prevention folks, who ran out of this building and went up to City Hall, literally looking in the streets to see where the fire trucks were, to get them to come to City Hall and stay out there, where we would stage them and send them verbally to different calls that were necessary.

CZ: So what time of day or night was this, when the water -- ?

RB: I want to say it's about between 8:00 and 9:00 in the evening. Somewhere around there was when it really got dicey, and we had to get out of here.

CZ: So it was already dark, and hard to see.

RB: Oh, yes. But even if we could see, with the water at the height that it was, our vehicles couldn't get around town. It was just a terrible, terrible day here.

CZ: So how many stations were affected?

RB: Well, we have four in town. Two of them were affected. At one point in time, ultimately what we did, even on Eighth and Clinton Street, by the high school -- the water -- they had kept it out of the building, and the backup generator in that building was on the roof, so it wasn't in jeopardy. They still had power. So we had pumps that were working, to pump the water back outside. But it's like trying to empty out a leaky rowboat; no matter how much water you throw out, more comes back in. Ultimately, I made the decision to abandon that firehouse, and that fire company (the double companies there), everybody was out of the Fourteenth Street firehouse, which was the high point in town. So they really didn't have a big water issue, and their backup generator was working. So all our fire companies were working out of there.

CZ: Yes, I remember seeing all the trucks.

RB: Yes. Lined up outside.

CZ: I was wondering when you were able to get out into the city and see the damage, either Monday night, Tuesday morning.

RB: Every single day. The only limitations for us to get around were based upon where the water had come in, that prevented vehicles from moving around the town. We lost quite a number of vehicles, not only the fire department but the city in and of itself. Nobody ever expected something to be in a five-minute time frame. It was almost like Chicken Little. "The sky is falling. The sky is falling." That's what happened in Hurricane Irene, and it was a non-event. They kept saying all day that we were going to get this rain; this surge was going to come. First, it was 1:00 in the afternoon; then it was 3:00; then it was 5:00. Finally, everybody kind of believed, I guess, or hoped, that we were going to be missed by this, and it was going to be another Hurricane Irene. Unfortunately, that was not the case; it caught everybody by surprise.

CZ: I was wondering, with the initial problems that you had during the storm -- were you able to solve them during the week after the storm? Or did they have to be addressed later?

RB: No, we had to stay out of these two fire stations for almost two weeks. There was raw sewage in the building. We had fuel oil coming up out of the boilers, in people's homes, and that oil just coated everything. We lost hundreds of thousands of dollars of equipment that was stored here. We had to wait for the water to recede. All the firefighters who were not on duty, their gear was contaminated so we had to arrange for a company to come in, and they could only take thirty suits at a time; thirty sets at a time. They literally hand-washed these things. Then bring them back, and then we'd give them another thirty sets. So it was time-consuming for them to get their gear back. But then the fire stations were a health hazard, as well, so we had to get companies to come in and decontaminate the fire stations. That took several days, because they had to spray it, to prevent black mold from growing inside the wood, and all the areas where water can

find its way. The firehouse here probably had, let's say, four feet of water on the ground floor.

CZ: The number of Hoboken fire personnel who live in town -- if you know that, and if you have an idea of how many of them were personally affected, and [unclear].

RB: I would say approximately 50% of the department still lives in Hoboken. Everybody was affected. The power was out in the entire town. That meant that if you didn't have a way to charge your cellphone (which became an issue), there were challenges with that; we couldn't even reach them by phone, to call them in. They would have to walk around to a firehouse, or walk to the Fourteenth Street firehouse, which seemed to be like a nerve center -- even though the emergency operations center was in the basement of City Hall.

At one point -- well, not at one point -- in the beginning, there was only one landline that was working in the emergency operations center. So battalion chief Feeney, who's working today -- he had gotten me a phone number for Verizon, and I spoke to a supervisor there who said if we could get them some space outside of City Hall,

they could bring a trailer in that had a small gas-powered generator, and inside that trailer they would have five stations with flat-screen TVs, internet capability, and phones that we could make available for the public -- because there were a lot of folks from out of the area who couldn't get in touch with their loved ones. We probably had thousands of goodwill phone calls: "Could you please check on my aunt? Could you check on my grandmother. I can't get a hold of her." It wasn't that they were in jeopardy, but there was no way to reach them. Their cellphones were dead, there was no power. They called it a recharging station. It was heated (because it was cool around then, the end of October), and they actually set that up for us, with five stations.

Then an idea came to me and I asked the supervisor, "Is there any way for you to set up more landlines in our emergency operations center?" He said, "I can micro-beam into the command post there, if you give me a couple hours and let me do what I have to do." I said, "Done. Do it." So they micro-beamed in -- and I'll tell you a funny story about that. You asked me what were some of the things that we had to take care of, in order to get the firehouses back in. And I mentioned to you that one of them was getting the station decontaminated. Well, after they

set up the micro-beam, we had five phones in the emergency operations center. We gave one to the National Guard, one to EMS, and three that the civilian emergency response team members were manning, to field all the phone calls that were coming in from everywhere.

So I was using one of those phones, and that was the morning that the mayor was going to be on the phone with President Obama. Her chief of staff came down -- I'm talking to this guy (well, woman) on the phone, asking for her boss, about coming in to decontaminate the firehouse. All of a sudden, Dan Bryan, who's the mayor's aide, and he's hopping from one foot to another, and he starts to write on a piece of paper, "Washington, D.C. President Obama." I finished my conversation, I hung up, and he goes, "Oh, Chief, thank you very much." I said, "What's the matter?" I thought maybe they wanted me to come up and be in the room for that phone call, for some reason. He said, "Chief, I don't know what's going on, but the mayor's on the phone with President Obama, and they're hearing your voice on the phone call, talking about decontaminating the firehouses." The signal that was coming in overpowered the landline that the mayor had, and the signal was bleeding into their conversation. So he ran down -- she's saying to Dan Bryan, "Why am I hearing Chief Blohm's voice on there?"

So he ran down to get me off the phone, but I had concluded the conversation anyway.

So there were a bunch of anecdotal things like that, that went on throughout this unfortunate emergency that we had. But I have to say that, all in all, all the difference agencies -- the health department; our business administrator; our deputy business administrator; environmental services -- I don't think the law department was active. They weren't in town at the time, and I don't think they could get into town, either. But it was a state of emergency, and the mayor and all of us just did what we needed to do, and worried about making it right afterwards, because we were worried about the life safety of this community. Nothing like that has ever happened before.

CZ: I'm wondering -- since the storm, the kinds of things that you and the department have done to prepare for another major event. What kind of reflection you've done on that experience, and [unclear] "I really would have done that differently." Things you've changed, or policies you've tried to enact, in reaction to this storm.

RB: Well, you know, the old saying is, "First time something bad happens it's shame on you. If I allow it to happen a second time, it's shame on me." So some of the things that we've taken into consideration is that, initially, we never gave much thought to our backup generators, that are powered by natural gas. When the utility company goes out, they're automatically supposed to kick in, and each firehouse would be considered a safe haven, depending on the environmental extremes. If it's ninety-five degrees out, if we had air-conditioning, certainly, elderly people who would otherwise be in trouble can come to the firehouse. Conversely, in the winter time, if it's twenty degrees out, and you wanted to get some people to get some warmth -- so we never really gave much thought to or concern about our backup generators being submerged under water.

Now, when we get these replaced, they're going to be at a minimum of three- to four-feet off the ground, the stand, and they'll be up that much higher. One of the other things we're talking about is to concern ourselves with having a faster response time with regard to making alternative arrangements, if we had to abandon our dispatch center, where we call our fire companies out; a better understanding of our storage facilities for

equipment. We have sealant containers that are sitting in our back yard here, in our parking lot. All of them were under three or four feet of water, so all that equipment in there sat in that water for over a week -- raw sewage and fuel oil -- not good for any kind of equipment, especially power equipment. Now some of that stuff can be decontaminated, but others can't.

So again, I think part of the agreement with FEMA is for reimbursement, that they would only reimburse us this time provided that we present some sort of a plan on how, in the event of something like this occurring again, that we wouldn't have the same kind of damage. So that constitutes us having everything brought up by three or four feet, so that, in the event that we have some kind of a water emergency again -- which could happen. It's not a 100-year storm; it could be a one-year to the next-year storm, for all we know -- but we need to be prepared for that. Our boats -- obviously we make sure they're up and running all the time. We had the forethought of taking our fireboat out of the water, prior to that storm surge. Thank god for that. We stored that in the marina over in Edgewater, on land, so that didn't sustain any damage whatsoever -- which was good. We're not going to put that boat out in that kind of a weather emergency anyway.

So those are some of the things we thought about. We need a better way of communications. We're doing more and more training on how to switch over from what we call our repeater frequency, to what is called "talk around," which is point-to-point -- which is only good for about three or four blocks of each other. If you have one walkie-talkie and I have another, you have to know how to switch to that particular channel, so you're no longer using the repeater, if and when it goes down. It's basically based on the power-outage of your walkie-talkie, and whether you can reach somebody within two or three blocks -- which is better than having dead noise coming out of your radio, when you're looking for fire companies and you can't send them anywhere.

CZ: I was wondering how it was working with the National Guard and the governor's office -- what kind of coordination did you do with them, both before and after the storm?

RB: Well, the mayor handled working with the governor's office. She was the point-of-contact in talking to them, and expressing what our needs were. She literally got a lot of powerful people into this town. We had, I

think, the Deputy Secretary for Energy, who was in town, and we drove him around, to show him our substations that were underwater, that had to be shut down before they fried. We had the Deputy Director for FEMA Response and Recovery here. He's a former battalion chief from emergency services in Boston. We had some mutual friends. As I was driving him around I said, "You're from the Boston area?" and he said yes. I said, "Do you know Such-and-Such," and he said, "Yeah, I know them." So it was funny that we happened to know the same people.

But the mayor was the key to that. She was constantly, constantly expressing the need of Hoboken, to the point where we got a lot more, I think, of a response than we might have normally gotten, under different circumstances.

With regard to working with the National Guard, it was day-to-day, shoulder-to-shoulder. They were in the command post. We made sure they had food. They helped us. Every time one of their trucks or vehicles was going to be sent out (it was called a mission), our folks would go with them on these missions; or, the CERT team (the Civilian Emergency Response Team folks) would go on the mission with them. They were just tremendous. They had their folks there at the command post; anything we needed,

we would ask that person who was manning that desk, he would call a couple of their folks in, and they would get it done. It was a very well-run way to do things, under extremely adverse conditions.

CZ: I was wondering if you were personally affected by the storm. Do you live here in town?

RB: No, I live in Paramus, New Jersey, but we were still affected. There was no power at my home for seven days. Here my wife was, alone at home, while I'm spending days sleeping in my car, in Hoboken, because the need was here. Of course, we spoke occasionally on the phone. She finally found a girlfriend who had power, and she ended up staying there for a couple of days. But it was a very depressing time, and most of the firefighters, I would suspect, who were in town for more than twenty-four hours at a clip -- everybody has their personal families that they're concerned about. I think it was admirable and worth mentioning the courage, and the determination, and the self-sacrifice of the men and women of the Hoboken Fire Department; that when the chips were down, they outperformed my expectations. They were literally super-people, supermen, with what they did, with the adverse

conditions that they had; with the limited equipment that we had; with the breakdowns -- our fire apparatus broke down. We borrowed trucks from other fire departments. We had an engine in from North Hudson. We weren't familiar with their equipment, and they brought in a person on overtime to man that fire apparatus; then our firefighters rode on it, as well. We had a fire the very first night of the storm surge, on Park Avenue. It was in the walls of a five-story building. It took almost two hours to get that out. We had quite a bit of stuff going on. Secaucus came in after the storm was over. They brought in two fire apparatuses to help pump out basements -- because all the panels had to be pulled; the gas meters had to be pulled in thousands of people's homes, before they could get their power back on. So in order to pull those panels, the basements had to be pumped. We couldn't remove our assets, our fire companies to do it, so Secaucus, which wasn't adversely affected like we were, had the resources and brought two of their fire companies in, much to the forethought of Mayor Zimmer, in speaking to Mayor Gonnelli, in Secaucus. They were here for two or three days -- I mean, Black Hawk helicopters were landing up on the waterfront. The vice-president was in town. I had an

opportunity to meet him. He sounds like your favorite uncle in five minutes, when you're talking to him.

It was funny. When we met him at the train station, where he came into town, he took pictures with us and everything; stood with us for twenty minutes, speaking. He was going to make a speech outside, and as he passed me by -- I had forgotten. I have what's called "challenge coins," for the fire department. I grabbed him by the elbow and I said, "Mr. Vice-President," and I had two of them, I said, "I would be honored if you would take these 'challenge coins,' one for you and one for President Obama." And he said, "Ooh, thank you very much." He goes, "You going to be outside when I speak?" I said yes. He goes, "I'm going to have something for you." I said, "Okay. Thank you very much Mr. Vice-President." As I'm walking through the doors, to go outside, I'm going, "Yeah. Right. He's going to have something for me."

I was outside ten seconds. The doors opened up, two secret-service agents came out, and said, "Chief, Chief Blohm." I said, "Yes?" "The Vice-President wants you back inside." Okay. I go back inside. He sent somebody out to one of his vehicles -- he had Challenge Coins there, and he gave me two Challenge Coins. I couldn't believe it. I went back outside, and I said to the police chief, I said,

"You're going to owe me big-time now." He goes, "What do you mean?" I said, "Here's a Challenge Coin from the vice-president. He says, "Wow, this is great."

After that, weeks later, I mentioned something like that to the mayor, and she said, "Yeah, I was so jealous that you got one. I didn't get one of those." But we all got to take pictures with him, and it was a memorable experience. I thought it was tremendous that he came to Hoboken, and took that much time to speak to people. I watched him talk to an elderly Italian woman who still wasn't in her home, when he showed up in Hoboken. And I mentioned to you about the Deputy Director for Cost & Recovery from FEMA. Well, he was there, as well. So she's talking to the vice-president, and he waves over these two big guys. He said, "You see these guys? They work for me. They're going to help you out. Don't you worry about anything." Then he went to move to the next person. She grabbed him and goes, "Mr. Vice-President, do you have my phone number, to call me?" He goes, "Don't worry about that. These folks are going to take care of you."

So they sat there with her, they took all her information down, and I understand that it was expedited for her. So it was nice that the Vice-President of the United States came into Hoboken because of the

magnitude of the emergency. I think a lot of that is because of the way the mayor broadcast that every day, relentlessly, on the phone: "I have to get this electric back in town." Or, "We have no way of knowing what shape our senior citizens are in."