

FEMA OPENS HURRICANE IRENE RECOVERY PURSE

BY WALTER ELLIOTT

NEWARK : President Barack H. Obama assured Gov. Christopher Christie (R-Mendham) and Cong. Bill Pascrell, Jr. (D-Paterson) here at Newark Liberty International Airport noon Sept. 4 that Federal Emergency Management Agency will have the funds to help "Local Talk" area residents clean up after Hurricane Irene.

"We're going to make sure we provide the resources needed," declared Obama while visiting Paterson. "I want to make it very clear that we're going to meet our federal obligations."

Obama made his promise before a New Jersey Congressional delegation that included Sens. Frank Lautenberg (D-Cliffside Park) and Robert Menendez (D-Union City). The President was touring areas of Paterson and Wayne affected by Irene's flooding of the Passaic and Pompton rivers.

Obama's promise also came before what "Local Talk" residents present at Paterson and Wayne for three hours. Pascrell's district includes Montclair, Bloomfield, Glen Ridge and parts of West and South Orange. They are some of the same towns that have suffered flooding of their streams which feed the Passaic, Rahway or Elizabeth rivers.

The President permitted FEMA to declare all of New Jersey's 21 counties a federal disaster area on Aug. 31. That declaration sets the stage for affected residents to receive individual and/or public assistance. That assistance may include low- or no- interest loans or recovery grant money.



FEMA inspectors have been out among the towns surveying the local damage. Pascrell, also on his Web site Aug. 31, announced that FEMA has set up recovery assistance centers in Fairfield and Paterson.

FEMA spokesman Bill McDonald countered, however, that no such centers have been officially opened as of 5 p.m. Sept. 6.

"There will be a center in each county," said McDonald from FEMA's Washington, D.C. headquarters. We do need to get computer and power lines into those centers. The last thing we want are having people waiting outside our centers when we're not open yet."

The Aug. 31 disaster declaration also started a 60-day filing clock for residents until 12:01 a.m. Nov. 1.

The President's reassurance came

after FEMA announced that they were running out of money. Another agency spokesman said, on Aug. 25, that the federal Department of Homeland Security arm was down to \$800 million for the rest of the federal fiscal year. That year is to end Oct. 31, followed by the start of Fiscal Year 2012 on Nov. 1.

FEMA had started the year with \$1.62 billion. Several previous natural disasters, including tornadoes in Alabama and Missouri, have led to the depletion.

The agency has focused its money on emergency services, deferring longer-term recovery projects - including several related to 2005's Hurricane Katrina. FEMA, however, may have possible 2012 funding restrictions set by Congress.

Several Republican members of Congress have said they would

provide FEMA \$1 billion more - provided that their Capitol Hill colleagues agree to make equal cuts elsewhere in the 2012 budget. They were suggesting, for example, relaxing scheduled tighter automobile fuel mileage standards.

Christie expressed his unhappiness of his Congressional GOP fellows' proposal in an Aug. 29 interview.

"I've no problem with FEMA - they've responded to every request," said Christie. "I'm asking Congress to send us the money first and cut later. We've people hurting here."

Public officials of every rank - including mayors Eldridge Hawkins, Jr., of Orange, and Wayne Smith of Irvington - have been urging their affected residents to record and file their damage estimates with FEMA.

"I've been urging the (Irvington) Board of Education to file," said Smith to "Local Talk" Sept. 7. "They've had some rooms flooded by Lightning Creek, which is a tributary of the Elizabeth River."

"We're asking our residents to file individual and public assistance claims," said Hawkins Sept. 6. "That includes taking pictures of their damages and keeping receipts of their lodging and other bills."

Some residents may have acted fast Sept. 6-7. Remnants of a tropical storm dumped five inches of rain in that 24-hour period - adding climatic insult to their injuries.

Filing procedures are to be found at fema.gov.