

ONE YEAR SINCE THE MAY 16 TORNADO, RECOVERY CHALLENGES CONTINUE IN NORTH ST. LOUIS

BY ABBY WOJCIK

Marking the one-year anniversary of the deadly EF3 May 16 tornado, St. Louisans gathered across the city to volunteer, reflect and find ways of moving forward, despite little recovery progress in the affected areas. For many residents, maintaining optimism has become increasingly difficult amid the scale of damage that remains in what happens to be historically disinvested north St. Louis neighborhoods.

Five people lost their lives to the tornado, along with dozens more injured and thousands of buildings torn apart, including schools, churches, century-old homes and businesses that stood as cornerstones of their communities.

One month after being sworn into office, Mayor Cara Spencer was tasked with responding to the worst tornado in St. Louis since 1959, and the widest in the region since reports began, according to a National Weather Service report.

In a much anticipated announcement on May 14, city leaders unveiled a plan to spend \$230 million of the \$255 million Rams relocation settlement, with \$110 million going to North Side redevelopment.

The next day, over 100 people rallied at City Hall demanding at least \$150 million, arguing that amount would mirror the \$50,000 worth of repairs the city said it would take for each storm-damaged home in the north city, according to Action St. Louis Executive Director Kayla Reed.

This rally followed protests at Mayor Spencer's first State of the City address on April 17 where five people were arrested. Action St. Louis and other groups were there advocating for more funds and a clearer plan for residents who were impacted by the tornado.

"Our team's focus shifted overnight from core services to a full-scale, emergency response that our city, simply put, was not prepared for," Spencer said in her City address.

It took until July 10 for the city to open a Dedicated Tornado Recovery Office from scratch, appointing Chief Recovery Officer Julian Nicks as director of the new department.

However, some argue efforts could have been made sooner than that, including Nahuel Fefer, former director of the St. Louis Community Development Agency. After working under four St. Louis may-



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ors, Fefer resigned in November 2025 over repeatedly clashing with Spencer's team.

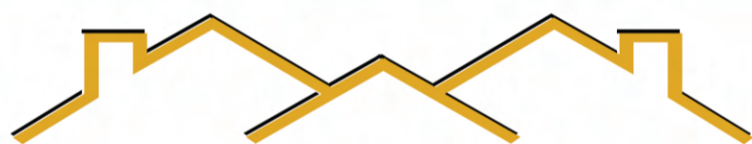
"We had a hoteling program, a home repair program, a rental assistance program, a down payment assistance program — all before the tornado," Fefer said in an interview with St. Louis Public Radio (STL-PR). "All of which could have been scaled up if funded to meet needs a lot more effectively than they were."

While residents waited for repairs, debris removal and financial assistance, city officials were simul-

taneously trying to navigate a federal disaster recovery system they had little experience using. Spencer told St. Louis Public Radio she didn't have "personal experience in disasters" besides the 2022 floods when she was on the Board of Aldermen. Neither Spencer nor Nicks had gone through the FEMA reimbursement system before.

Demolition work was delayed while officials sought clarification from FEMA about what expenses would qualify for reimbursement.

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PIER PROPERTY GROUP SCALES BACK PLANS FOR FLATS AT FOREST PARK

BY NICKI DWYER

Pier Properties' Michael Hamburg has announced revised plans for the adaptive reuse of the Reliance Automotive Building at McPherson and Kingshighway.

Several factors have contributed to scaling back the project from the original plan to add a five-story structure atop the existing two-story building, Hamburg said.

"Since acquiring the building in 2022, we saw a sharp increase in interest rates, construction costs, and insurance costs," Hamburg said. "This pulled institutional investor interest in real estate development back to almost zero. Projects around the country have been difficult to capitalize, but that has been amplified in markets such as St. Louis."

Instead of the initially proposed 144-unit apartment project, Pier's revised plans call for 50 apartment units

to be constructed within the original two-story building, plus a small single-story setback penthouse.

"After investing a lot of time and investment in the other strategy, we took a step back last fall and realized there was a great project for the neighborhood and the site if we worked with what we had. Getting the Reliance Automotive Building listed on the National Register of Historic Places, which was approved earlier this year, will result in carrying out a full historic rehabilitation that will last for years to come. The building facade will be brought back to its original historic look with new windows, masonry work, etc."

In the revised project, one-bedroom apartments will range in size from 770 to 1,057 square feet, and two-bedroom units will be up to 1,500 square feet. The average unit will be 930 square feet. Plans



An architect's rendering of the revised project planned for the Reliance Automotive building at Kingshighway and McPherson.

feature 25 garage spaces inside the building, and 25 spaces on a gated surface lot next to the building. Amenities will include a secure package delivery room, a lobby with entertaining space and coffee bar, heated parking garage, and rooftop terrace with an outdoor grilling area. Rents will range from \$1,800

to \$3,000 per month.

Extensive landscaping surrounding the building should remain essentially the same as originally planned, Hamburg said. Expect construction to start later this summer. He anticipates that Flats at Forest Park will open in summer 2027.

TORNADO RECOVERY

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But after months of waiting for a response, the agency reiterated that it doesn't cover demolition of structures that were condemned before the disaster, forcing the city to fund the work itself.

Spencer said she believed St. Louis' circumstances warranted an exception and that the city owed it to residents to fully explore the possibility. Demolitions did not begin until nearly 10 months after the storm.

A St. Louis Public Radio analysis of the time that passed between the city's requests and FEMA's responses shows St. Louis spent at least 10 weeks waiting to find out if the private property work would be covered at all and another eight weeks waiting for clarification about vacant properties and other categories.



This tornado-damaged house remains unrestored as of May 2026.

The federal government distributed some direct aid, but not enough intended to fund rebuilding. The average per-household payment was about \$6,000. Of the 2,500-plus applications made for government aid to help home repairs, only 24 homes have been completed — a

ratio of one in 100.

According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, St. Louis has yet to push for crucial funds that many disasters typically get from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. In the past, the city received this type of federal aid

during the 2011 Joplin tornado and the 2022 major floods.

Nicks said Mayor Spencer has mentioned the funding source, and the city sees it as a valid one, but that the city is following U.S. Sen. Eric Schmitt's lead on the push for those funds.

For many residents, however, recovery has never depended solely on federal aid or City Hall. In neighborhoods where outside investment has long been inconsistent, much of the rebuilding effort has come from neighbors, churches, volunteers and nonprofit organizations stepping in where they can. They have continued to show up for one another in ways both large and small: clearing lots, repairing homes, organizing drives for food, clothing, bricks and refusing to let devastated communities disappear from memory.

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