

Path of Destruction

Historic neighborhood and black businesses suffered structural damages from devastating tornado

by Aisha Jefferson

March 19, 2008 -- Atlanta's historic Sweet Auburn neighborhood, home to The King Center and the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, was among the areas hit hard by 130-mile-per-hour tornado winds that tore through the city's downtown area Friday and extended its devastation to nearby communities, including Cabbagetown and Vine City.

The tornado's path of destruction measured six miles long and 200 yards wide and blew out several windows in downtown hotels, office towers, and sports arenas, including the Georgia World Congress Center, the Westin Peachtree Plaza Hotel, the CNN Center and the Omni Hotel at CNN Center. Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin and Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue declared states of emergency for the affected areas.

According to state officials, Friday's storm was the costliest in the state's history, racking up at least \$250 million in damages. As crews continue to clean up debris, it is uncertain how long building repairs will take. Atlanta officials have asked the federal government to quickly provide aid to help the city recover.

Situated just east of the central business district, the Auburn Avenue corridor in Sweet Auburn is comprised predominantly of African American-owned businesses, celebrated landmarks, and organizations including the Atlanta Life Insurance Group, the Integral Group, and the Atlanta Daily World newspaper. The headquarters of 100 Black Men of America and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference are also located there.

"(Auburn Avenue) kind of looked like a war-torn area," says Stewart Williams, president of the Butler Street YMCA, referring to the mangled billboards and large amount of debris strewn about the streets.

Street closures in the area remain as a result of bricks falling from crumbling buildings. With more than 21,000 residents and businesses without power, some 20 to 30 Auburn Avenue businesses didn't get their power restored until Monday, says Atlanta City Councilman Kwanza Hall, who represents District 2, which includes the Sweet Auburn area. However, Hall says, The King Center and the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site sustained little or no damage.

The Atlanta Life Insurance Group experienced cracked windows and minor roofing damage to its headquarters but nothing severe, according to spokeswoman Lydia Hancock. Renaissance Walk at Sweet Auburn, a mixed-use condo project developed by the Integral Group, an urban real estate development & investment management company, in partnership with Big Bethel AME Church, sustained a few blown-out windows. H.J. Russell & Co. (No. 15 on the BE INDUSTRIAL/SERVICE 100 list with \$364.4 million in assets) suffered no damage to its development projects in the area.

Not so fortunate was the 84-year-old Herndon building, named for Alonzo Herndon, founder of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, which experienced extensive damage. The southeast corner of the building collapsed and caved in on itself, toppling a neighboring structure that only weeks ago had housed an Atlanta Police sub-precinct, says Butler Street YMCA's Williams, whose organization owns the Herndon building.

The two-story building of the Atlanta Daily World, an 80-year-old, black-owned newspaper that publishes weekly print editions along with a daily online edition, had extensive roofing and water damage, forcing staff to relocate. "Our roofing was completely blown off. Only the wood flats are left. It just drowned everything," says publisher Alexis Scott.

Although an insurance evaluator hasn't come yet, Scott estimates tens of thousands of dollars of damage accumulated. In the meantime the paper will publish from a temporary location for its next issue and is still in the

process of selecting a more "permanent" temporary location as repairs occur with the building. "We're just going to have to do it from a remote location."

The newspaper building was attached to the national headquarters of the 100 Black Men of America, The South Education Foundation, and Apex Museum. Thomas W. Dortch Jr., chairman emeritus of 100 Black Men of America, says it was the first time during his 35 years in Atlanta that a tornado "hit down in the central business district." Hall says the last tornado to touch down in Atlanta struck in the city's Buckhead area in 1975 and hit the Governor's Mansion.

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