

I am thankful for many things, even amid the tragedy and disaster of Helene. Let me express my gratitude to this community. I will never be able to fully thank everyone for their support in the recovery after the storm. People didn't respond to the needs of their neighbors, friends, and community because of expected approbations and expressions of gratitude; they gave their support because they are good, decent human beings who love people and their community.

I am thankful for our town and county staffs and officials. No one had to ask anyone to work beyond normal hours; every worker knew their duty was to work until the job was done. County Commission Chairman Gary Shields and County Manager Derek Roland were at town hall early in the week offering help. County Commissioner John Shearl worked to get the transfer station to accept residential and commercial storm debris free of charge. County emergency management director Warren Cabe was in constant contact with the Highlands' staff to support recovery efforts. The governor and his staff were proactive in marshaling state resources. The governor personally called mayors, including myself, throughout WNC to determine critical needs in impacted communities. Our legislative delegations, Representative Gillespie and Senator Corbin played important roles in marshaling resources and support for the region well beyond district boundaries.

While government entities were focused on restoring infrastructure, I am thankful for actions taken by critical support services such as the Highlands-Cashiers Hospital. Their staff made sure medical access was secure during this disaster. The police, sheriff, fire, and EMT departments remained open and functioned in a great coordinated effort, along with NCDOT.

I am also thankful for all the nonprofit and faith based organizations who stepped forward to make sure local needs were met. In the coming weeks and months, these organizations will also be committed to helping communities that will face tremendous recovery challenges. One does not have to ask or motivate these organizations to respond to tragic events, it is in the organizational DNA to do so.

I am also so thankful for the business community's response in Highlands. They, too, are committed community institutions. Townhall was flooded with business owners offering to help get Highlands back on its feet. These fine folks were not concerned about money or profits; they simply were concerned about our residents, visitors, and workers. If I or a staff member asked for assistance from a business it came forth without conditions or delay.

I am also thankful for residents who showed great endurance and patience during this state of emergency. Almost everyone creatively adjusted to the power outages, communication failures, and road closures. We all can learn from this event in preparing for the next storm. I felt sorry for our stranded visitors. They, too, put forth endurance and understanding in adjusting their plans. I hope they will come back under better circumstances.

So, let's all be thankful and grateful for how everyone has responded to this emergency. We should be proud of our work. To paraphrase Churchill, "It was our finest hour." This finest hour will continue to be so as we provide support to our fellow Western North Carolinians.