

The Sunshine Economy: Rebuilding The Northern Bahamas After Hurricane Dorian

By [TOM HUDSON](#) • JAN 27, 2020
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A ship sits hundreds of yards from the ocean in Marsh Harbour four months after Hurricane Dorian.

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Great Abaco Island remains beautiful but scarred. It is scarred from the seemingly endless hours of winds and water from Hurricane Dorian in September. Its economy is quiet — quieted by the worst storm spawned from warm Atlantic waters ever to hit the Bahamas. And its residents are few. Thousands forced off the island because they have no homes any longer.

Healing from a hurricane, especially one as strong and devastating as Dorian, will be measured in years.

"Four months later, I think the Bahamas is doing a halfway decent job," said Katherine Smith, managing director of the Disaster Reconstruction Authority. "But we can always improve where we are and that's what the authority intends to do."

The authority was created by the Bahamian government in late 2019 to manage the cleanup and rebuilding needed after Dorian.

Great Abaco Island was scoured by the storm in September. Dorian stalled over Abaco and Grand Bahama to the west, spinning its category 5 winds and sweeping walls of water over both islands. Four months later on Abaco, countless tons of debris remain, power has not been fully restored, and life is limping along.

"One of the big priorities is this debris cleanup," Smith said during a bus tour of Abaco Island earlier this month. "It's really a big problem and it's only a problem because of the scale of the hurricane and the devastation and damage that it did in Abaco."

By early January, debris had been cleared from the roads. It was pushed aside and piled up, but not necessarily picked up. There has been frustration with the speed at which government contractors have removed the debris. Smith admitted they need to be more aggressive. "Nobody had ever experienced this before. So for the first crack at it, as a country, I think there was a lot of shock. Initially, maybe decisions were slow in making because you had to get over the initial shock you had to deal with."

Smith said she's spending several days each week on Abaco, gathering information, hearing from residents who have stuck it out, and working to marshal resources needed for the clean-up and rebuild. "No excuses," she said. "There are no excuses. So that's why I tell you, we're not going to apologize for making the decisions that we need to make in the best interest of the country."



Temporary dome housing awaits to be used in Spring City, on Great Abaco Island on Jan. 7, 2020. The Bahamian government expects to build 250 domes for residents as the rebuilding effort gets underway.

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Some of those immediate decisions include how to provide housing for residents remaining on the islands, for those who left and want to come back, and for people needed for the rebuilding work.

In Spring City, a small neighborhood 10 miles south of Marsh Harbour, nine temporary domed housing units sat on decking. The government expects to assemble 250 of them for Abaco Island, which suffered the worst damage. The Inter-American Development Bank estimates 87 percent of Dorian's \$3.5 billion in damages is on Abaco. Three out of four homes and apartments on the island suffered at least some damage. Over half were severely damaged, according to the bank's assessment in November.

No More Mudd



The Mudd neighborhood in Marsh Harbour had been cleared and fenced off four months after Hurricane Dorian. The storm demolished the area, and neighboring Pigeon Pea. Both housed primarily Haitian immigrants.

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None of the homes and structures in The Mudd and Pigeon Peas neighborhoods survived the storm and what came next. The largely Haitian settlements in Marsh Harbour were destroyed by Hurricane Dorian. The storm left the areas in rubble. Four months later, the neighborhoods were mostly cleared of the debris. The areas were closed off with chain link fences topped with razor wire. Smaller piles of rubble were gathered around dumpsters and dump trucks. The earth had been scraped of signs of the shantytowns that were the focus of controversy for several years.

The treatment of these areas and their former residents has been contentious for some time. Dorian's destruction brought forth familiar tension.

"I think people need not get confused with immigration, immigrants, and the Bahamas," said Smith. "We have to respect the laws of the country." After the storm,

the government quickly banned any rebuilding or new development on these lands. It has not said officially how the areas will be used.

During the bus tour of Abaco in early January, Smith was non-committal about their future. "There has to be a conversation about a new town planning for Abaco. A lot of people have been talking about it, but the authority has to proceed with the working help and contribution and collaboration of the residents of Abaco," she said.

And she cautioned those who had lived in the neighborhoods undocumented about returning to take part in the rebuilding efforts. "Our mandate is always to make sure that Bahamians are given the first opportunity to work. Only after Bahamians have been exhausted then we need to look at other labor."

Relying on South Florida

Before Hurricane Dorian, SEACOR Island Lines would get about 600 phone calls a week at its Fort Lauderdale headquarters. After the storm, that jumped to over 2,000 calls a week as family, friends and companies looked for ways to get supplies to the islands. The demand increased so much, SEACOR's employee of the year last year was the receptionist who answered many of those calls.

SEACOR is one of the cargo connections between South Florida and the northern Bahamas. It has nine vessels that service the Bahamas. Its freighters to Grand Bahama and Great Abaco Island represent about 20 percent of the company's revenue.

In the days after the storm, SEACOR cut its shipping rates to break-even for the affected areas. Because the island's financial infrastructure was so badly damaged — bank buildings and communications — clients had to pre-pay for weeks after the storm. It only restarted shipping on credit to Marsh Harbour in mid-December.



SEACOR Island Lines Pres. Charles Gittens stands in front of a load of plywood destined for Freeport, Bahamas in Dec. 2019. The shipping company is handling a lot more building supplies as the rebuilding effort begins in the northern Bahamas after Hurricane Dorian.
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Inside SEACOR's warehouse near Port Everglades, piles of building supplies competed for space with Christmas and New Year's goods in mid-December. There were pallets of flooring tile, roofing material, washers and dryers, and plywood were among the shipments prepared to make the journey. Vehicles, too. Scores of sedans, trucks and SUVs, most used, were waiting to be loaded and sent over to replace vehicles destroyed in Dorian's storm surge.

"We consider ourselves a part of the Bahamian community and a lifeline that links South Florida to that community in the Bahamas," said SEACOR CEO Dan Thorogood.