

## **Damascus, Virginia: Rebuilding Stronger One Year Post-Helene**

DAMASCUS, VA – Following the impacts of Hurricane Helene last September, Damascus, Virginia has demonstrated remarkable resilience and a commitment to community. Through an incredible outpouring of support and neighbors helping one another, Damascus is not only recovering from disaster but actively building a brighter future together.

Last year, right before the much-anticipated peak fall tourism season, Hurricane Helene flooded downtown Damascus and the surrounding low-lying areas. The water level on Laurel Creek measured at 18 feet before the gauge washed away entirely. Just downstream, Laurel Creek carried away trucks, campers, and homes, which destroyed one road bridge and dammed up another, resulting in widespread flooding throughout downtown. The area lost power, water, and cell tower communications for several days. In just a matter of a few hours, the storm also destroyed the upper 17 miles of the Virginia Creeper Trail, washed out portions of US-58 and Route 91, and closed over 400 miles of the Appalachian Trail between Georgia and Virginia.

According to Kermit Turner, Damascus police and fire chief, “We were very fortunate that the flooding hit in the daytime. Emergency services were quick to respond and we had a lot of help from mutual aid agencies, including some of the larger swiftwater teams placed on standby nearby to cover the Southeast. As a result, Washington County had no loss of life.”

Once everyone was accounted for and the residents’ immediate needs were met, the Damascus community worked quickly to restore downtown and salvage what it could of the fall season. Volunteers got right to work helping with muck-out and debris removal at homes and businesses. Following countless hours of hard work, Damascus is coming back better than ever. From Julie Kroll, the Town’s recreation director, “We’ve been doing what we can to find beauty in the storm. We could either sit around and be sad, or we could do something about it, and so we decided to do everything we could to bring Damascus back.”

Fortunately, most of the infrastructure surrounding Damascus has since been quickly restored and reopened. Remaining closures and work projects, as of August 2025, are:

- Virginia Creeper Trail upper half, 17 miles between Whitetop Station and Damascus - The US Forest Service has begun clean-up along the trail corridor and debris removal is ongoing. This portion of the trail will be reconstructed largely within the existing corridor. Upon contractor selection, work is expected to begin in October 2025, and the tentative timeline for completion is Fall 2026.
- VDOT Bridge replacements: Orchard Hill Rd in town limits expected completion August 2026; Taylors Valley expected completion January 2026; Grassy Ridge Rd expected completion November 2025

In addition to FEMA Public Assistance and the restoration of infrastructure, economic recovery and support for small businesses has been a top priority from the start. Town manager Chris Bell says, “While the flood brought devastating damage to our community, we are committed not only to restoring what we lost, but to

building a more resilient and diverse economy. This is our chance to highlight all the outdoor recreational assets that make Damascus so special - from our world-class trout fishing to adventure biking on our backcountry trails. We will emerge from this stronger and with a renewed vision for our future.”

The following efforts over the past year have proven to be critical to the town's tourism recovery strategy:

- As soon as possible, debris was removed and temporary road and sidewalk repairs were completed to prepare downtown to welcome back visitors. Volunteer efforts also included quickly restoring and beautifying the parks and public spaces.
- Half of the Virginia Creeper Trail from Abingdon to Damascus quickly reopened in October for public use due to a strong partnership between the Towns. Bike shops pivoted to promote the open half of the trail, branded as the “Start to the Heart.” In December, the Towns jointly amended their ordinances to allow e-bikes, making the open half of the trail more accessible to a broader range of visitors.
- The Town of Damascus announced early on in October that the Appalachian Trail Days Festival would continue as planned in May and would be a much-welcomed boost for the spring season.
- With the help of the Virginia Tourism Corporation, the Town of Damascus hosted public input sessions to develop a Tourism Action Plan. The plan emphasizes collaboration among businesses and organization partners by building up downtown entrepreneurship, marketing, and communications to both increase the length of visitor stays and improve the quality of life for residents.
- The Town of Damascus continues work to grow and diversify its target audiences by leveraging the open outdoor recreation assets nearby. Of note are the new Trout Days and DAM200 events, the Fish Blue Ridge regional campaign, the addition of the first Blue Ridge Snorkel Trail site in Virginia, and promotion of the new South East Backcountry Discovery Route.

Just as Mayor Katie Lamb has said so many times over the past year, “Not only will we get through this, we’ll be back better than we’ve ever been!” For decades now, the many trails around Damascus have been a source of economic growth and vitality. Continued growth and diversification will only strengthen Damascus tourism as the upper half of the Virginia Creeper Trail returns. Damascus is open for business, and our local businesses eagerly welcome visitors back to town.

Damascus is resilient. Damascus is rebuilding better than ever. Damascus is OPEN. Damascus Strong.

#### **More about ongoing recovery efforts:**

- Approximately 140 structures in Damascus were damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Helene, resulting in an estimated loss of \$10 to \$12 million across residents, businesses, and public infrastructure. A total of 12,086 cubic yards of debris was removed from Damascus, including construction and demolition, vegetative, and waterway debris.
- FEMA Public Assistance: The Town of Damascus reported \$805k in qualifying damages to town-owned buildings and infrastructure, approximately half of which has been received or obligated to date. Projects have included town hall and fire station renovations, road paving, brick sidewalk restoration, tread repairs to the town-owned portion of the Virginia Creeper Trail, park restoration, stormwater infrastructure repairs,

and more. FEMA Public Assistance permanent repair work projects are ongoing.

- Pending & Ongoing Town Projects: Recovery is still ongoing in many ways, and storm-related, grant-funded projects are expected to continue through at least 2028, with an estimated \$3.5 million in planned projects that will include streambank stabilization, parks restoration, urban and community forestry, and stormwater infrastructure.
- FEMA Individual Assistance: Washington County residents received a total of \$2.4 million in individual assistance, of which \$2.1 million was within the Damascus address.
- Trails to Recovery: This new nonprofit was formed to support post-Helene recovery. From September 2024 to August 2025, Trails to Recovery has raised nearly \$1.7 million in private donations, completing 83 residential home repairs and 8 home rebuilds for Washington County residents.
- Volunteer Support: During the immediate response phase in just the first month post-Helene, the Town of Damascus estimated at least 20,000 volunteer hours to support search and rescue, debris removal and muck-out, temporary repairs, resource distribution, and more.
- Additional Public Safety & Mitigation: Washington County has announced a new alert system via mobile app, My Washington VA. Stream level gauges have been reinstalled on Laurel Creek and Beaverdam Creek by NOAA and VDEM, respectively. The US Forest Service is conducting salvage timber sales and debris removal in the national forest and anticipates prescribed burns in the area in 2026.

#### **More about impacts to the local tourism economy:**

- Bike Traffic: Based on anecdotal reports from Damascus bike outfitters, bike rental and shuttle traffic on the Virginia Creeper Trail is down an estimated 70% to date for the 2025 season.
- Immediate Impacts: The Town saw significant impacts to visitation for the Fall 2024 season. Meals and lodging tax was down 70% year-over-year for October and November 2024. Additionally, many businesses had already incurred significant expenses from merchandise and food orders in preparation for the peak fall season.
- Meals & Lodging Tax: The fiscal year 2025, from July 2024 to June 2025, showed a 28% decrease in lodging tax revenue year-over-year, reflecting a decrease in overnight visitation. However, meals tax revenue for the same period had only a 1% decrease in meals tax revenue, which is nominal. This is attributed to strong support from both recovery workers and the Damascus trade area. Ongoing local support of our Damascus businesses will be critical to continued success in economic recovery.

#### **More about the Virginia Creeper Trail:**

- The Virginia Creeper Trail is OPEN from the Start to the Heart, Abingdon to Damascus, about 17 miles. Bike outfitters are providing full rental and shuttle services from their Damascus storefronts to the Abingdon trailhead. E-bike rentals are also available.
- At Alvarado Station, the halfway point between the two towns, the Town of Abingdon is operating an outpost with drinks, snacks, ice cream, t-shirts, sweatshirts, and more. Open daily from 9am to 4:30pm, seasonally.
- The upper half of the trail between Whitetop Station and Damascus remains closed until it can be rebuilt

by the US Forest Service. There is no access to the Virginia Creeper Trail past Damascus at this time. The US Forest Service has published a tentative timeline for project completion in Fall 2026.

**More about the new and improved Virginia Creeper Trailhead at the Damascus Town Park:** - Damascus has made a concerted effort to improve trail user experience with the following trailhead improvements at the Town Park: trail resurfacing, crosswalk addition, renovations to the restrooms and historic Caboose, and the addition of the new welcome arch and Rhythm of Damascus mural.

- The Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy has partnered with the Town of Damascus to operate the historic Caboose as a welcome center at the Town Park, open Friday to Sunday, 9-3.
- The new Virginia Creeper Trail arch was built with trestle timbers salvaged from the original Trestle 7, donated by the Town of Abingdon to the Town of Damascus. The arch in Damascus complements the arch at the Abingdon trailhead, and a third arch is planned for the Whitetop Station trailhead. These arches provide an excellent photo opportunity and enhance the sense of place for visitors.
- The new mural at the Damascus trailhead, the Rhythm of Damascus, blends historic elements into a mountainscape alongside current recreational activities, emphasizing our area's rich heritage and its enduring appeal as a premier outdoor destination. A great addition to the Town Park, this mural was completed by artist Heidi Nisbett of Sketching Summits and supported by Friends of Southwest Virginia.
- The replacement of Trestles 16 and 17 in downtown Damascus is included within the scope of the US Forest Service Virginia Creeper Trail Reconstruction Project and will be another significant improvement to the Damascus trailhead in the coming months.

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