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Next round of FEMA aid tending to towns' large-scale, long-term needs

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Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger

The Casino Pier JetStar roller coaster looms in the background as a worker walks balancing along the joists of the new boardwalk in Seaside Heights currently under construction.

For five months after Hurricane Sandy, the bulk of the grant money New Jersey received from the Federal Emergency Management Agency went to individuals who needed help rebuilding their homes and their lives.

Now, municipal governments throughout the Garden State are receiving a bigger share of FEMA money as they embark on large construction projects, according to the federal agency.

Data from FEMA shows that \$64 million was given to municipalities, public entities and certain nonprofits from the day Sandy struck on Oct. 29 to mid-January. By Monday, that number reached \$241.5 million.

"A lot of the money you're seeing now is for the bigger construction projects," FEMA spokesman Chris McKniff said. "There are a lot of larger projects in a lot of municipalities that will take some time."

So far, the biggest bundle of those funds, called public assistance grants, was \$28 million sent to the New Jersey Department of Human Services. That money reimbursed the department for "micro-city" shelters that housed thousands of displaced New Jersey residents and emergency workers from out of state. Two of those were set up in Monmouth Park in Oceanport and in Linden.

As money going to communities has increased, the number of individuals seeking FEMA help has started to level off, FEMA said.

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Now, communities throughout the state have started to bombard FEMA with requests to be reimbursed for hurricane damages and expenses. Under current public assistance grant rules, FEMA will pay for 75 percent of a project while the municipality picks up the remaining 25 percent, according to FEMA.

As more municipalities move past the cleanup process and begin arduous reconstruction projects, municipal requests should continue to surge, McKniff said.

Belmar has received \$2 million from FEMA, reimbursements for debris removal and for pumping water from buildings.

The borough hasn't yet sought funds to help pay for its \$8 million boardwalk, Mayor Matt Doherty said. And the borough still has sand-filled sewers and pavilions that need to be rebuilt by summer 2014, Doherty said.

"Once we're done with the boardwalk, we'll submit for more funds," he said.

The **Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission** has received nearly \$8 million from FEMA, but that's just part of an approved total of \$15 million that will go toward plant repairs, temporary office trailers and sludge shipping costs, according to Michael DeFrancisci, the commission's executive director.

The sewage plant, located where the Passaic River meets the Newark Bay, was devastated by Sandy, which flooded it with 200 million gallons of saltwater and destroyed buildings, washed away vehicles and destroyed equipment.

That led to the release of billions of gallons of raw or partially treated sewage.

The sewage plant has been partially restored, but operators there still must manually switch on valves and pumps until the automated system is repaired, according to DeFrancisci.

DeFrancisci has warned that the sewerage commission could be a frequent applicant for FEMA funds for several years.

Sea Bright has received \$1.8 million. Like Doherty, Sea Bright Mayor Dina Long said she isn't close to finished with pursuing FEMA dollars.

Sea Bright has spent almost \$5 million on cleanup efforts alone — the equivalent of the borough's annual budget, Long said. And the borough still needs to address a slew of public facilities that were all but destroyed during the hurricane, such as the borough hall and police headquarters.

"It's just incredible," Long said. "We haven't even started rebuilding yet. We're still cleaning."