Dusty Compton | Staff

An EF4 tornado moves through downtown Tuscaloosa at 5:13 p.m. on Wednesday, April 27, 2011.

West Ala. suffers death, destruction

By Jason Morton
Staff writer

TUSCALOOSA | At least 15 people are dead and more than 100 injured in the wake of a devastating tornado that hit the city late Wednesday afternoon, destroying thousands of homes, businesses and other structures.

That was the sobering message a stoic Mayor Walt Maddox delivered Wednesday night amid the aftermath of a series of storms that killed 72 people in four states.

"This afternoon, Tuscaloosa was devastated by a tornado which has created death and destruction across our city," Maddox began. "To my fellow citizens who are hurting tonight, in the days, weeks and months ahead, our city will rise to meet these challenges by dedicating every available resource."

Among those resources was a host of emergency powers temporarily granted Maddox by a unanimous vote of the City Council. All but one member — Councilman Kip Tyner, whose District 5 was among the hardest hit — was in attendance.

Parts of Alberta in Tyner's district were destroyed, with at least one apartment complex reduced to shambles.

So, too, was Rosedale Court on 10th Avenue, where at least one person was killed.

McFarland Boulevard and areas around its intersection with 15th Street and Veterans Memorial Parkway resemble war zones. Businesses, like Krispy Kreme, that were considered institutions have been erased from this city's map.

Recovering from the widespread destruction — the tornado left a mile-wide swath through the city, from the southwest corner to its northeast tip — will take every resource the city has and then some, Maddox said.

"Our infrastructure has been decimated by today's tornado," Maddox said. "We're talking about a matter of months in dealing with this recovery."

Statewide, at least 58 people died, including 11 in Jefferson County. Eleven deaths were reported in Mississippi, two in Georgia and one in Tennessee.

Storms came through the state earlier in the day, hitting parts of West Alabama hard, including Berry in Fayette County and Coaling in Tuscaloosa County.

The tornado crushed the city's Curry Building, where the city's Environmental Services Department is housed. Those services are inoperable.

The Tuscaloosa Police Department's East precinct in Alberta was damaged, as was Tuscaloosa Fire and Rescue's Station No. 4.

But the lives lost and uprooted were the chief concern of city officials.

"Of course, the real recovery will be seen in the relentless spirit of our citizens," Maddox said. "Throughout Tuscaloosa, citizens are reaching out to each other, demonstrating that our strength and our faith will overcome all, even in this dark hour. ...

"We're going to have to have the help of others to make it through."

As of Wednesday night, the Belk Activity Center and University of Alabama Rec Center had been confirmed as shelters. UA officials stressed that the Rec Center was for students who are homeless, not those who are without power.

The University of Alabama and the University of West Alabama will be closed today in the wake of Wednesday's storms.

Neither school had made a decision when they would resume classes.

UA spokeswoman Cathy Andreen said Wednesday night that "essential personnel should report to work as directed by their supervisors. Any UA employee who has experienced personal hardships as a result of the tornado should notify their supervisors."

UWA spokeswoman Betsy Compton said that though the school did not receive any structural damage, the school is closing because power outages are widespread and the storm impacted a widespread area.

There are plenty of people without power. At least 83,000 homes were without power in Tuscaloosa as of 9 p.m., Maddox said. Across West Alabama, that number swelled to 144,000.

Statewide, 370,000 were without electricity.

Tuscaloosa city schools will be closed today and Friday.

City school officials said that of the 24 schools in the city system, only two — Alberta Elementary and University Place Elementary/ Middle School — sustained serious damage.

Lesley Bruinton, spokeswoman for the Tucaloosa City School System, said the Central Office and all school campuses would open on Monday.

Tuscaloosa County Schools will be closed today .

Maddox said Gov. Robert Bentley has pledged the full support of the state, including 1,400 members of the Alabama National Guard, who have been deployed across the state.

"This is a difficult situation for the state but we are responding," Bentley said Wednesday.

"We were most saddened by the loss of life and those who have been injured in these tornadoes."

President Barack Obama has declared a state of emergency in Alabama and ordered federal aid to assist in the recovery.

The National Guard had deployed units to Tuscaloosa on Wednesday night that were expected to arrive before daybreak today, Maddox said, adding that dozens of roads were impassable.

DCH Regional Medical Center is calling for help, too.

Hospital officials are expected to call on the Alabama Emergency Management Agency to help with a temporary, mobile hospital.

DCH missed most of the severe damage, but was running on emergency diesel generators Wednesday.

A nearby power substation was hit, and the connection to the hospital was severed, said DCH spokesman Brad Fisher. Engineers told him that the building would be running on emergency power for the near future. All necessary functions of the hospital can run on the emergency power, and the diesel tanks are refillable.

"Tragedy and destruction has encompassed our city, but it will not conquer us," Maddox said.

"Rather, it will inspire us to demonstrate our patience, our faith and our confidence that a new day will certainly dawn."

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