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RENTAL HOUSING BUSINESS

Skyline Living: Taking action when disaster strikes

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- Matthew Organ, President, Skyline Apartment REIT





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- R. Jason Ashdown, Co-Founder, Skyline Group of Companies

In the late afternoon of September 21, 2018, six tornadoes – including a severe category EF-3 tornado with winds reaching upward of 250 km/h – ripped through the Gatineau and Ottawa communities. The resulting damage left thousands of people throughout the region without power, with some outages lasting for several days. The City of Ottawa reported that approximately 25 people were injured during the storm, and six people were taken to hospital for treatment. With the destruction that the tornadoes left in their wake, it is surprising that there were not more people who required serious medical attention.

The storms also blew through the Mont-Bleu neighbourhood, which is home to Skyline Living's Les Jardins Radisson. The property was in the middle of the tornadoes' path, and the winds caused significant damage to the buildings, displacing the tenants and staff. As the tornadoes approached the five high-rises that make up Les Jardins Radisson, they picked up tonnes of debris from other properties along their path and unloaded that debris through over 650 windows, doors, and balconies. The winds and debris also overturned cars, ripped off an entire roof, and twisted off most of the mature trees on the property.

What followed in the weeks to come is a testament to Skyline Living's unique business model of putting tenants and the community at the heart of its company. This article documents Skyline Living's relief efforts and its continued work to support and rebuild the Gatineau community.

Putting tenants first

Once the storm cleared, the Skyline Living staff jumped at the call to action, working with emergency services to help any injured tenants and evacuate all 629 units safely. There were a couple of minor injuries, and a Skyline Living employee required medical treatment for more serious injuries. As tenants evacuated their units, they were stunned at the level of property damage. Many tenants compared the property to a post-apocalyptic movie set, with downed power lines and debris scattered across the property that was once beautifully landscaped with gardens and mature trees. In just minutes, a lively community was flipped upside down and everyone knew that the devastation would be felt for months to come.

"When a disaster like this happens, our first priority is the safety of our tenants," said Matthew Organ, President, Skyline Apartment REIT. "Our second priority is to get to work, and to help our tenants return to their homes as quickly as possible."

Planning next steps

Fire trucks and police cars lined the streets to help tend to residents, while Hydro-Quebec worked in tandem to clear the downed trees and power lines

that littered the roads. Hydro-Quebec tweeted that 165,000 customers were without power, and more than 2,000 residents in the Gatineau area were displaced. It was also reported that the storm had downed over 60 hydro poles, which would need to be replaced to restore power to the community.

The Skyline Living staff began assessing the damage, working with city officials, Hydro-Quebec, and the fire and police departments to determine next steps.

Property managers plan for many situations, and hope that a disaster like this will never take place. Fortunately, Skyline Living has had a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) in place for many years. While they have implemented the plan in the past, they have never had to put the BCP to this type of test.

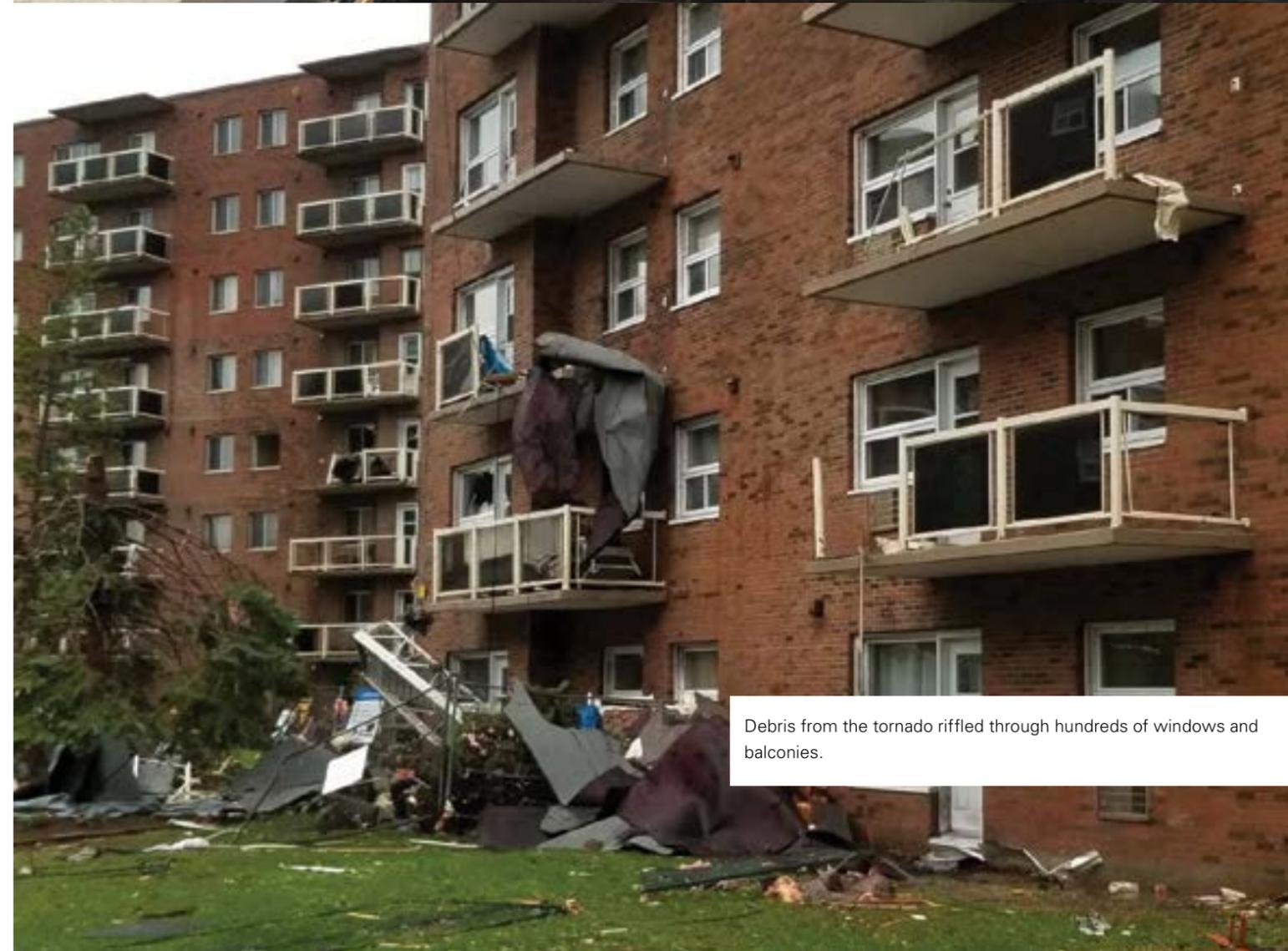
Within hours of the tornadoes touching down, Skyline Living activated members of its BCP committee. They developed a list of priorities, established roles and responsibilities, and began to put the next steps of the plan in place.

Upon hearing of the tornadoes, and the devastation they caused to Les Jardins Radisson, R. Jason Ashdown (co-founder of the Skyline Group of Companies) and other staff members loaded tools and generators on several trucks and began the six-hour drive to Gatineau. By the time Jason arrived on site, he had already connected with contractors, equipment rental companies, and suppliers from the Skyline Living network. Given the level of disaster in both Ottawa and Gatineau, the team knew that it would be critical to secure people, equipment, supplies, and resources as quickly as possible.

"It was devastating when I first walked on to the property," said Jason. "I felt for the over 600 families that had been evacuated. After seeing the damage the storm had caused, I thought it would be months before we would be able to make the property safe enough to bring our tenants home. After a few moments of panic, I was relieved we had a plan in place to help us get started. For property management companies that do not have a plan, I would highly recommend



A crew of tradespeople and insurance adjusters assessing the damage to a roof that was torn off one of the Les Jardins Radisson buildings.



Debris from the tornado riffled through hundreds of windows and balconies.

developing one or at least have the relationships in place with your tradespeople and suppliers to call upon in an emergency.”

With the tenants safely evacuated, the property secured, and a team mobilized, the Skyline Living team could concentrate on securing the site and beginning the cleanup process.

Supporting a community in need

There are many moving parts when disaster strikes. One of the first steps was to get emergency power installed to an on-site office to create a home base for the Skyline Living team at Les Jardins Radisson. They would use this makeshift office to collectively make critical decisions with the team back at Skyline Living’s head office in Guelph, Ontario. This setup was crucial in Skyline Living’s communication strategy to keep tenants and their families informed, and to provide real-time updates to head office staff.

When tenants were evacuated, they were unable to take everything they needed for an extended period away from home. All indications were that the power would be off for at least a week, and tenants would likely be displaced for several weeks while teams worked on the property to make it safe for their return.

Skyline Living quickly realized that it had to implement a system to allow tenants to collect key belongings and create some normalcy in their lives amongst the chaos. Some tenants needed medication, baby supplies, and school or work supplies. Skyline Living developed a “runner” service with designated staff available on the property from 10:00 am to 7:00 pm daily. The runners were tasked with safely escorting tenants through the debris and construction to their suites. It took a lot of on-site resources and many hard hats, but it was essential for reducing the impact on tenants. It also provided Skyline Living with breathing room to get the cleanup work underway.

The “runner” service also enabled tenants to collect their pets that were left during the evacuation. For pets that were not retrieved,



Just a few of the 100 staff members, tradespeople and volunteers that had a hand in rebuilding Les Jardins Radisson.

on-site staff worked to provide food and water during the evacuation period. Skyline Living also partnered with a local organization, Petalia, to arrange for additional pet care and transportation where required.

Skyline Living comes together

With a well-rehearsed plan in place, the Skyline Living team worked as efficiently as possible to clean and repair the property. They also dedicated significant time and energy to tenants and the Gatineau community. The on-site crew grew to more than 100 staff members and tradespeople from across three provinces, who worked tirelessly up to 16 hours a day. This included staff from Skyline Commercial in Ottawa who had to

deal with their own clean-up as a result of the tornadoes as well.

“The Skyline Living mandate is committed to empowering our employees to actively build and support vibrant communities,” said Deanna Kiar, Director of Human Resources, Skyline Group of Companies. “We pride ourselves on the unique culture that we have cultivated, with like-minded staff members who reflect our company values. We saw firsthand here just how dedicated our team is to the communities Skyline Living serves. The moment the news broke about the tornado, we had staff members from across Canada contacting us to lend their support.”

Skyline Living set up impromptu food drives, while other Skyline Living properties collected donations for the Red Cross. Staff members from Kingston, Cornwall, Peterborough, and Guelph left their work and home life responsibilities to join the relief crew in Gatineau. These efforts would not have been possible without the support and understanding from staff members’ families, as well as co-workers who remained behind to take on additional work duties. It was truly a coast-to-coast team effort that received recognition for the entire community, with the Mayor of Gatineau commending Skyline Living’s efforts.

“I thank Skyline Living for its collaboration with Gatineau’s emergency services. I commend your



Volunteers and Skyline Living staff welcomed the Gatineau community back home with food and home essentials at their Community Support Village.



Property Managers, Micheline and Donna, organized a group of staff and volunteers that would help over 1,500 tenants return home on move-in day.

crews on their swift response, thanks to which families were able to return to their homes quickly, safely and in an orderly fashion.”

The Mayor – Maxime Pedneaud-Jobin

When the storm initially hit, the Property Manager was out of the country. Many tenants depend on the Property Manager and have built a strong relationship with her, so they were looking for guidance in the turmoil. Upon hearing the news, Donna Van Luven, a Skyline Living Property Manager from New Brunswick, knew that she had to lend her support and fill the role as acting manager for the Les Jardins Radisson community while the Gatineau Property Manager was working her way back home. With no flights in or out of the Gatineau area, Donna jumped in her car and started her nonstop 12-hour journey to Les Jardins Radisson from New Brunswick.

“I didn’t even think twice about it,” said Donna. “I knew that this was a Skyline Living community in need and it is our responsibility as the property manager to assist and lend support to our tenants, regardless of whether or not they are in your managing region.”

Their work did not go unnoticed, with many tenants taking to social media to sing the praises of the staff’s efforts. In what was a frustrating and stressful event, the tenants expressed their gratitude for the staff’s tireless work.

“Thank you to everyone who is doing everything they can to get us home as soon as possible. You don’t know how much many of us appreciate your hard work and determination! You really do not realize what you have until it’s gone so thank you for all that you all have done.” – Chelsea Kelly, Les Jardins Radisson tenant

“In a situation like this with such significant damage, you just cross your fingers that you have chosen the best insurance provider,” said Jason. “Right from our first meeting on-site with FM Global, it was clear that they had our back, allowing us to make use of any and all resources and get the property back together as quickly as possible. Their faith in us to get the job done was

very appreciated and truly streamlined our efforts. There was no red tape or hoops to jump through – just support.”

“Skyline did an amazing job in the wake of this disaster,” said Marie-Claude Leblanc, FM Global. “It was easy to see early on that they had the experience, drive and resources to take care of business. As a commercial and industrial property insurer, we knew that if we gave them the support to make quick decisions it would benefit everyone involved. And it obviously did. All the residents moved home in just 10 days, which was a spectacular accomplishment.”

Round-the-clock communication

Not long after the dust settled, tenants began to express their frustration. They were unhappy with their displaced living situation and looked to Skyline Living to provide a timeline, answer the tough questions, and keep them up to date. Skyline Living’s head office in Guelph became a 24-hour communication hub for its Gatineau residents. The Customer Service and Marketing teams worked day in and day out to ensure that tenant voices were being heard and questions were being answered. The team set up a solid communication process as soon as the storm hit and worked with on-site staff to ensure that communication was consistent and updated in real time. By having daily calls with on-site staff, the team was able to assess the biggest concerns day-by-day and determine how to best inform tenants.

It was clear very early on that transparency was key. Tenants had questions and head office knew that addressing the questions, especially the difficult ones, was the best way to show that they valued the tenants throughout the entire process. Skyline Living used its website and social media channels to provide real-time building updates in French and English to keep the community apprised of the progress.

The communications shared on Skyline Living’s social channels and website involved more than just building updates. Staff also shared progress pictures, and provided information on

non-building specific information and available services, such as when tenants could pick up belongings and services that would take care of tenants' animals while they were away. It also enabled tenants' family members to stay up to date and reassured them that loved ones were looked after, as illustrated in this Facebook comment:

"Merci beaucoup from a family member, my son is one of your tenants. I have been following your updates since last night. Under a very stressful time for Skyline and tenants, you have been very informative." – Jeanette Lee, family member of Les Jardins Radisson tenant

Skyline Living's communications strategy proved to be the most effective way to reach their tenants. Its online presence made sure that tenants questions and concerns were addressed in a timely manner throughout the entire process.

Move in day



Children of Les Jardins Radisson present Skyline Living Property Managers, Donna and Micheline, with a thank you poster.

"Thank you, Skyline! My girlfriend, son and I are so happy to finally be home and all the support offered by you all as well as the pop-Up Village made us really feel loved. It's been a rough ten days at times, but I can only imagine all the work you and your staff have done. Also, would love to find the staff member of yours who found my wallet a few days ago and returned it to me to properly thank him. Thank you again!" – Kevin Wallace, Les Jardins Radisson tenant

The Skyline Living on-site team worked around the clock with several contractors to ensure that tenants could return to their homes safely. While it should have taken months to make Les Jardins

Radisson safe enough for tenants to return, the hard work and dedication of Skyline Living's team enabled tenants to return home just 10 days after the tornadoes hit.

Once engineers and Gatineau officials deemed that the apartment complex was safe for tenants to return, the Skyline Living team faced another challenge – moving over 1,500 people home at the same time. Team members worked with local emergency services to create a process for guiding traffic back onto the property and getting tenants back into their suites as seamlessly as possible.

The Skyline Living team knew that on move-in day, tenants would be returning to less than perfect conditions, with boarded up windows, spoiled food, and units in disarray. A volunteer group led by Roy Lamond from the nearby Chelsea community approached R. Jason Ashdown to offer their help in making the move easier. They discussed the needs of the local community and came up with the idea of creating a pop-up Community Support Village.

Skyline Living funded the Community Support Village, with staff and volunteers from Chelsea running it on-site at Les Jardins Radisson on move-in day. The Community Support Village was welcome to everyone in the Gatineau community affected by the storm. They provided residents with hot food, fresh produce, groceries, and pet and cleaning supplies with many of the items donated by local restaurants and hardware stores in Chelsea and the surrounding Gatineau area. Staff members were also specifically designated to assist tenants with moving back in and cleaning their units.

Moving tenants into 629 units all at once seems like a disaster waiting to happen. Skyline Living developed a process that would accommodate all tenants so that they would not have to go another day away from home. It took a small village of staff, community volunteers, and tenants, but the results served as testimony to Gatineau's sense of community.

"The sense of community on move-in day was heartwarming," said BJ Santavy, Vice President, Skyline Living. "We have a number of older tenants in the buildings, and their neighbours and our team of staff and volunteers were only too eager to help carry things in and get their suites back in order and feel more like a home."

The importance of tenant insurance

This is the second major environmental event to occur in the area within the past two years. In the spring of 2017, a flood caused the evacuation of more than 130 homes in this Gatineau community.

Property managers have a responsibility to create a safe and comfortable environment for tenants, which includes ensuring that they understand the importance of tenant insurance. By educating its tenants, Skyline Living demonstrates that it is looking out for tenants' best interest and protecting them from the possibility of an insurable loss.



R. Jason Ashdown spoke with the CBC and other reporters, discussing tenant insurance and providing updates on Les Jardins Radisson.

One tenant had only been living in his apartment for three weeks when the tornado hit. In hindsight, he's glad that Skyline Living requires tenants to secure renters' insurance.

Amidst the chaos, media outlets were posted on-site to discuss Skyline Living's relief efforts. While there, a CBC reporter spoke with R. Jason Ashdown around the topic of tenant insurance.

"Insurance is a requirement for every tenant that moves in," said Jason. "Unfortunately, we have seen that some tenants cancel their insurance after move-in in an effort to save money. This often means when something bad like a tornado happens, the tenants that need the help the most do not have insurance in place to reduce the financial impact."

Rarely is anyone prepared for an event like this to happen, but renters' insurance exists to reduce some of the financial impact. Without the proper

coverage in place, many tenants at Les Jardins Radisson were left to cover their own temporary living expenses while they were displaced, as well as any wages lost or contents damaged.

A continued commitment

Skyline Living's commitment to its tenants did not end on move-in day. The company understood that the tenants' displacement and aftermath of the storm would be a major financial burden for many tenants. Skyline Living, working with its insurance providers, continued to show its support to tenants by pro-rating November's rent, understanding that tenants were not able to live in their building and use its facilities.

Skyline Living carries lost rent insurance for this reason and, although it was a small savings, the tenants appreciated it. This effort was echoed in many tenants' comments, with one tenant praising the company:

"I have received the letter concerning the credit applied on my November rent and I would like to sincerely thank you.

I would as well share my great acknowledgment for the extraordinary services provided by Skyline following the tornado on the 21st of September 2018.

All my family was amazed and moved by the particular attention given to our comfort and the immediate action taken following the tornado. We really felt supported. We would like to address our sincere thanking to all the Skyline employees for their proof of devotion and patience." – Monique Lupien Rochon, Les Jardins Radisson tenant

Throughout the restoration process, Skyline Living put its tenants at the heart of every decision made. This business model is ingrained in the company values to ensure that it does the right thing for the tenant, putting people first.

The tornadoes' impact on the Gatineau community will be felt for months to come. Throughout this ordeal, and during the continuing restoration process, the Skyline Living team demonstrated that the best way to prepare for the unknown is to have a plan in place, be prepared to mobilize quickly, and provide transparent communication throughout the process.

Skyline Living would like to give a huge shout-out to the devoted staff, trades, suppliers, and volunteers for rising to the challenge and getting tenants back home quickly and safely. Most of all, they would like to thank the tenants for their patience and understanding throughout the process. Sometimes, a disaster can bring out the very best in people, as was certainly the case here.



We want to take a moment to recognize the amazing people that Skyline Living relied upon to rebuild our community in Gatineau, QC.

Thank you to our contractors and tradespeople from A1 Restoration, The Byng Group, Direcso, Lauriault Electricque, Gestion Urbaine, Qualite d'Air Outaouais, Khan Management, Abattage Emondage specialise, Winmar, Priority Fire, Gentec Generator, Douglas Consultant, Morin Insolation et Toiture, OG Contracting, Bailiff Monpetit, Commissionnaires, FM Global, GUARDA, LGL

GLOBE, Regie de Batiment, SGS Elevators, VH Construction, and National Construction. It is because of your hard work, loyalty, and support throughout the event that we were able to get our tenant's home so quickly.

We also would like to thank the City of Gatineau, the Gatineau Fire and Police Departments, and all the emergency and first responders for ensuring the safety of our staff and tenants throughout the entire process. Thank you to Hydro-Quebec for your unbelievable efforts to restore power so quickly, ensuring that interior relief efforts could continue after the sun went down.

Thank you to Roy Lamond for organizing the community group from Chelsea that helped plan, setup, and run the amazing Community Support Village. Their efforts allowed us to welcome the Gatineau community back home with a warm meal and some much needed supplies.

And thank you to the amazing community volunteers and businesses within the Mont-Bleu area. This includes Chelsea's Pizza and IGA Chelsea for donating meals to our Community Support Village to Walt Small, Ryan Hipwell, and Geoff Bossi from Home Depot Cornwall and Home Depot Gloucester for donating supplies and materials. Thanks as well to the countless community members that came by the site daily with warm baked goods, coffee and well wishes. Your kindness and support truly warmed our stomachs and our hearts.

To our amazing staff. Your continued hard work, dedication, and support were monumental in the rebuild of the community. In our 19 years of business, never have we seen a community join in unity to fully embody the heart of our business. We are beyond proud of the resilience shown in the face of trauma to rebuild a community that we all love.

As a real estate management company, it is easy to forget that we are in the people business, but this storm proves that Skyline Living truly has a vested interest in the people and communities that we serve.

Finally, to our tenants. Your support, understanding, and patience throughout this event have been unmatched. Facing an incredibly difficult time, you remained accommodating and flexible throughout the restoration process.

The tornadoes may have damaged the buildings, but they were not able to dim the light of the amazing Gatineau community.

Thank you,
Skyline Living

