

During the natural flood disaster in December of 2023, later identified by FEMA as DR-4754, the Town of Phillips sustained damage to several roads, one being more severe than the rest. The South Branch of the Sandy River leapt over its banks running through homes and yards to make its way down the Number Six Road. Flood waters ran swiftly, carving away up to 6 feet deep, and in one area, nearly 100 feet across, from the road bed and surrounding property. Rock, gravel, silt, and other debris washed into the field that lay along the easterly side of the road. Small Road was also cut off and damaged. Some of the town's residents were stranded and emergency vehicles were unable to access this area.

The town reached out to its State Representative and in turn the Department of Environmental Protection for guidance on how to handle this catastrophic and life endangering situation. The town took immediate action to address the flooding in the area where the South Branch breached its banks and was fortunate to secure equipment to assist in stopping the flow of water down the Number Six Road. Several areas were dammed up by the storm waters in the South Branch and water continued to pour back into the roadway and properties along the road. The town was given discretionary authority to remove the debris, rock and gravel obstructions to protect the residents, their property and the road. The town was able to locate contractors who were not already busy on other roads damaged by flood waters and proceeded to contain the South Branch to its original course. During this catastrophic flood, there was no true oversight or guidance provided to the town in how to handle this crisis. The town took action to counter the danger the flood waters posed to human and animal life and to property. The town also sought to protect the town's natural resources, but with the raging waters of the South Branch, the preservation of human life was its top concern.

Months later, after the flood waters receded, the town was contacted by the Department of Environmental Protection and the site of the flooding was visited. Although allegations have been raised that the town went beyond its discretionary authority, the town maintains that it did what was necessary at the time to stop the water from causing greater risk to human life and further damage to the property of the families that live along Number Six Road and Small Road. Currently, the town is working diligently with the DEP and several other agencies to resolve the issues created by the floods last December, including hiring a River Restoration firm and is now awaiting its plan.

Mother Nature was severe in her explosion of water with the overflow of the South Branch. The field abutting the river was a picnic area for eagles and raccoons for days as they feasted on the fish stranded by the flood waters when they receded. Small, overflow channels of the South Branch were filled with silt, packing it hard enough to walk on. Months later the town was made aware that those channels had been utilized for salmon spawning. Those channels were devoid of water for days, through no fault of the town, while the South Branch ran amok on Number Six Road and the field and properties it abuts.

Phillips has been working with The Nature Conservancy and other agencies for years prior to the December 2023 flood to improve undersized, failing culverts by installing 'stream smart' crossings. The town is working with TNC to find ways to make the town more resilient to the impact of flooding. Recently, TNC did a tour of the impacted area with a contracting firm that will be doing further studies on this subject. Residents and property owners of Phillips can expect a community survey, prepared by TNC, in the coming weeks and town officials are urging participation.