

Bailing Out: Storm swamps basements; 10 families forced to evacuate

Wednesday, April 18, 2007

By TANYA DROBNESS AND DAN PROCHILLO
of *The Montclair Times*

A pounding nor'easter lashed rain, sleet and snow across New Jersey, flooding hundreds of basements and forcing evacuations in Montclair and compelling NJ Transit train commuters to crowd bus lines this past Monday.

While the Montclair Fire Department checked more than 300 flooded cellars in homes throughout town, over 120 soaked basements were pumped by Tuesday afternoon, Township Manager Joseph Hartnett said.

Fire crews were inundated with calls from property owners requesting to have floodwater pumped out of their basements.

The department has six pumps capable of drawing 250 gallons of water per minute, and since the storm first struck they were in use nonstop, 24 hours per day, Deputy Fire Chief John Herrmann said.

Other problems swelled from beneath. Hundreds of residents throughout Montclair coped with sewer backups, as sanitary systems were overwhelmed and clogged by blockages. Surface runoff, basement infiltration and percolation caused major indoor flooding.

While the nor'easter packed one of the largest rainfalls ever recorded in New Jersey, the financial brunt of the storm will hit the township with an expected \$50,000 in overtime costs, as well as thousands of dollars in damages suffered by property owners, Hartnett said.

Other problems swelled from beneath. Hundreds of residents throughout Montclair coped with sewer backups, as sanitary systems were overwhelmed and clogged by blockages. Surface runoff, basement infiltration and percolation caused major indoor flooding.

While the nor'easter packed one of the largest rainfalls ever recorded in New Jersey, the financial brunt of the storm will hit the township with an expected \$50,000 in overtime costs, as well as thousands of dollars in damages suffered by property owners, Hartnett said.

The storm dumped nearly 7 inches of rain on the township during a torrential drenching cited as the worst since 1999's Hurricane Floyd, according to Essex County Office of Emergency Management (OEM) Public Information Officer Kevin Lynch.

Since then, this week's storm also marked the largest number of houses with sewerage backing up into basement toilets and domestic sewer lines, Fire Chief Kevin Allen said.



▲ Nathan Goldwasser dumps out the 10th 5-gallon bucket load from his wet/dry vacuum after clearing the flooded basement wells of their house on Upper Mountain Avenue Monday after the record-breaking rainstorm soaked the entire region. Staff photo by A

About 100 more basements are slated to be pumped, Allen said. He hoped by today all the calls would have been answered.

Power was shut off at several businesses and homes “as a safety precaution,” Hartnett said.

This past Saturday, municipal crews began preparing for the storm, placing barricades at spots, including Burnside and Park streets near Montclair High School, usually surged by street flooding during heavy rainfall.

“We were very well-prepared for this event,” Hartnett said.

The storm shattered records in the tri-state region, breaking the April record that had stood for more than 100 years, Hartnett said.

Before firefighters pumped basements, inspectors were sent by the department to check whether the soaking liquid was pure water or whether it was contaminated with sewerage, which the pumps can’t handle.

In addition, the inspectors ascertained if the water posed a threat to residences’ electric or gas systems and if any utilities needed to be shut down until the waters receded, Allen said. Extra firefighters were called in to perform those pre-pumping evaluations.

Acting Gov. Richard Codey declared a state of emergency Monday, as more than 1,000 residents were placed in shelters statewide and nearly 40 roads and highways were shut down or partially closed.

About 10 families from throughout Montclair were forced to evacuate their homes and stayed with relatives or friends, according to Hartnett.

“We had rain of biblical proportions. Thank God it wasn’t for 40 days and 40 nights,” Lynch said.

While the storm slammed wind gusts of up to 50 miles per hour across the state, 30-mile-per-hour winds swept across Essex County, according to Essex County Sheriff Armando Fontoura, who also serves as the county’s OEM director.

“By and large, we did pretty well in Essex County. It could have been a lot worse, given the magnitude of the rainfall,” Fontoura said.

“We were fortunate that street and stream flooding was not as severe in Montclair as we sometimes get from flash storms. But the total rainfall was so massive that the most of the problems we experienced were sewer back-up problems. So we didn’t suffer from the life-threatening effects that some other towns did,” Hartnett said, referring to Bloomfield resident Nicholas Pennucci, who was found dead next to his parked car on flood-rushed Main Street in Belleville this past Monday morning.

The Montclair-Boonton Rail Line was halted for five hours this past Monday, as high water conditions flooded the Watsessing Avenue Station in Bloomfield, rising “several feet” above the average level, according to New Jersey Transit spokesperson Courtney Carroll.

“We were able to restore limited service to and from Hoboken only [Monday afternoon],” Carroll said.

Midtown Direct service to New York on the Montclair-Boonton Line also was shut down Monday. Passengers were asked to board Morris & Essex Midtown Direct trains and connect at Newark Broad Street Station, or take the PATH train to Hoboken. All trains were on their regular schedules by Tuesday.

High water conditions were also reported at other transit locations, including rail yards that were “partially flooded,” Carroll said.

This past Tuesday, passengers who usually use the Willowbrook and Wayne-Route 23 Park/Rides departed from the Montclair State University parking deck, where their NJ Transit tickets were honored for contingency bus and regular rail service, NJ Transit spokesperson Joe Dee said.

Commuters were advised to use their tickets and passes on NJ Transit buses or the Newark Light Rail, or to take DeCamp buses.

It was likely that nearly 700 more commuters than usual packed the buses at DeCamp Bus Lines on Greenwood Avenue, Executive DeCamp Vice President Gary Pard said.

Yet all 80 buses, taking seven routes based in neighboring towns, ran close to schedule and without flooding. "We were able to get through – not necessarily timely because of traffic in general, but we were able to get through," Pard said.

About 7,500 commuters ride the DeCamp bus lines seven days a week.

"We have standing on the buses during the day anyway," said Pard on Tuesday. "So nothing unusual yesterday."

The Montclair-Glen Ridge-Nutley Chapter of the American Red Cross responded to disaster assistance requests from the township's Office of Emergency Management, as well as from local residents, according to the chapter's director of emergency operations and safety services, John Kocotos. The chapter has been making home visits to residents living in flooded basements and basement apartments.

Kocotos visited two basement apartments in Montclair this past Tuesday, finding indoor flooding about a foot high that forced the families out of their homes.

"It's pretty well destroyed," Kocotos said, referring to damaged bedding, couches and clothes.

The residents, who were not injured, were given food and clothing before they found refuge at the homes of friends and relatives, Kocotos said.

He said both families appeared to be "very upset."

Of his 15 years at the Red Cross, Kocotos said, "This is the most rain that I've ever seen at one time, that I can remember."

Aid will continue throughout the week and into next, but there is no time limit. "It's still very early in the operation," he said.

Shelley Labiner, who resides at the corner of Upper Mountain Avenue and Windsor Place, said she was using "every towel we had in the house" on a rotating basis, wedging them under her two leaking basement windows to absorb some of the "sustained seepage rolling down the walls."

The bottoms of those windows are 5 feet below ground, and the wells surrounding them filled partly with water that eventually started to penetrate.

While Labiner worked the towels, her husband ran the wet/dry vacuum, slurping up the water and then making nearly 35 runs outside to dump the filled receptacle.

It was a good thing the couple had installed sump pumps and French drains around the perimeter of their home, located near the base of a slope that rises to the Mills Reservation, not long after they bought the property nearly 16 years ago.

"Otherwise we'd have a lake," Labiner said.

While many residents fought to stem the tide flowing into their homes, the Fire Department chipped away at its own daunting workload.

One of its calls was to rescue a driver whose minivan had plunged into a monster puddle that formed on Grove Street near the Clifton border, Herrmann said.

The driver, who was in her mid-50s, crossed the border into Montclair Sunday evening when she became mired in the massive pool of water to the top of her vehicle's tires.

Responding Montclair firefighters pulled up next to her van in a truck, aligned one of its side doors with the van's driver-side door, then helped the woman step out and into their rescue vehicle.

Allen said he saw the worst case of flooding at a six-story apartment building at the corner of Church and South Park streets, which had about six feet of water inside when firefighters arrived.

Due to flooding, a number of township streets were closed Sunday night into Monday morning, including Park Street between Chestnut Street and Watchung Avenue, Valley Road near Edgemont Park, segments of Grove Street and the area of Appleton Place and Burnside Street.

For information on assistance, contact the local Red Cross chapter at 973-746-1800.

For more information about NJ Transit schedules, visit www.nj.transit.com.

Copyright © 2007 The Montclair Times