

"Iowa Under Siege" Newspaper Articles, June 10, 2008

THE FLOODS OF 2008

Coralville Lake: Breach puts I.C., Coralville in peril

Cedar Rapids: Enters 'unexpected' territory

Decorah, New Hartford: Residents are evacuated

Vinton, Palo, Manchester: Major flooding worries

Monticello: Sewer plant threatened by high water

Cedar Falls: Record water level anticipated

IOWA UNDER SIEGE

What tornado spared, water got

By Orlan Love

The Gazette

New Hartford — Resignation reigned Monday in flood-ravaged New Hartford, barely two weeks after an EF5 tornado ripped through the Butler County town, killing two residents.

"Everyone who was missed by the tornado got hit by the flood," which raged out of control Sunday afternoon when rain-swollen Beaver Creek topped a dike west of town, Butler County Sheriff Jason Johnson said.

"I know of maybe four homes that weren't flooded," said Fire Chief Brad Schipper, who spent Sunday night in the floodwater-surrounded fire station.

Most of the town's 659 residents obeyed orders to evacuate their homes on Sunday afternoon, but at least 150 residents waited until they had to be rescued by boat, Sheriff Johnson said.

Firefighters broke five of six boats trying to get everyone out, and human chains 10 to 15 people long were formed to rescue people from cars," Johnson said.

To the east, two Decorah nursing homes were evacuated shortly after midnight Sunday and early Monday morning. By Monday morning, mandatory evacuations were taking place in two low-lying neighborhoods. The city's three bridges over the flooding Upper Iowa River were closed, too, necessitating an 86-mile detour through Minnesota to get from one area of town to the other. Highway 52 north of Decorah remained closed last night.

The Upper Iowa, swollen by 7 to 9 inches of rain Saturday and Sunday, crested Monday morning at 17.9 feet- 2.7 feet higher than the previous record flood in 1941. At 9 p.m. the river had fallen to 15.5 feet. Flood stage is 12 feet.

“Sightseers need to stay out of Decorah,” said Winneshiek County spokeswoman Nancy Sacquitne. “We’re truly trying to save the infrastructure.”

Dramatic and overpowering as it was, no injuries were reported as of last night.

In New Hartford, an anxious Steven Coker couldn’t wait to get back into his flooded home Monday to rescue the dog he left behind in his hasty departure Sunday evening.

When the Sheriff’s Office allowed residents back into the town Monday, Ralphie, a 13-year-old mixed breed dog-- “my best buddy for the past 12 years”-- was glad to see his master, said Coker, 50. “He was right there when I opened the door. He came right to me.”

Sheriff Johnson estimated that 2,000 Butler County residents have been displaced from their homes by the May 25 tornados and the subsequent flooding.

Evacuations were also under way Monday in Greene and Clarksville as the rising Shell Rock River threatened homes, he said.

Cedar Falls

The Shell Rock, Beaver Creek and the West Fork of the Cedar River were all fueling the rapid rise of the Cedar River, which was just an inch short of record levels in Cedar Falls at 3:45 p.m. Monday, with a crest nearly 4 feet into record territory expected today, according to Cedar Falls police.

The National Weather Service predicts the Cedar will crest at 100 feet — 12 feet over flood state. The predicted crest will be below the top of the flood levee, so downtown flooding is not expected.

Though no evaluations have been ordered, the city has advised residents north of the river in flood-prone areas to evacuate.

“We’re into unknown territory. A lot of areas that have never been flooded before are about to get flooded,” said Curt Hildebrand, a station commander with the Cedar Falls Fire Department.

Mona Koester, who lives on Cottage Grove Drive, said she expected to ride out the flood in her home but called for help when she realized that flood-water could contaminate her knee-replacement surgical wounds.

Winneshiek County

Decorah resident Martha Teetshorn said she was in her basement Monday morning, checking on the water, when she heard a knock at her door and someone yelling, “Get out, Martha!”

She was among the dozens of people evacuated from the neighborhood known as the Flats in Decorah.

Everyone evacuated from the Aase Haugen Home and Wellington Place care centers were OK on Monday, said Aase Haugen administrator Sue Bjelland. Most of the residents were taken aboard Hawkeye Stages buses to the Congregational Church, except for 13 individuals who went to Winneshiek Medical Center and some assisted living residents who went to the Decorah Methodist Church. They may be able to return to the nursing homes today.

Winneshiek County Engineer lee Bjerke said the flooding caused mudslides and washouts and left debris on highways throughout the county. Numerous county roads have been closed because of the flooding.

Spillville reported extensive flooding, and the community's north and east bridges were closed. The Inwood Ballroom is flooded, as were 10 to 12 houses.

The flooding is much worse than in 1993, said resident Mike Klimesh.

In Fort Atkinson, the news bridge on Highway 24 was closed after part of the approach collapsed, Fire Chief Keith Herold said, adding the department had to rescue a couple by boat between Fort Atkinson and Festina.

The Turkey River crested Monday morning, and the threat is lessening, he said.

Correspondents Paul Scott and Sarah Strandberg contributed to this report.

-Contact the writer: (319) 934-3172 or orlan.love@gazettecommunications.com

Dire warning issued for I.C.

Flooding could approach 500-year level; finger point to UI construction project

By Gree Hennigan

The Gazette

Iowa City — Portions of Iowa City may see worse flooding than in 1993 and could approach the 500-year flood boundary because of a barrier placed in the Iowa River for a long-delayed University of Iowa construction project.

With that news, and word that Coralville Lake was predicted to go over its spillway for just the second time in its 50-year history by the time you read this, some Iowa City residents began evacuating their homes Monday.

“It’s pretty critical,” Iowa City Manager Michael Lombardo said.

Iowa City officials gave the dire flood warning for water levels upstream from Iowa Avenue on Monday. They said a barrier known as a cofferdam installed in the river near the Iowa Memorial Union is elevating water levels upstream as far as where the Iowa River meets Clear Creek.

As a result, flooding would be worse than in 1993 in those areas when Coralville Lake releases in excess of 25,000 cubic feet per second.

Typically it would take a release of 29,000 cubic feet per second to produce that kinds of flooding, hydraulic models the UI provided the city on Sunday show.

The Army Corps of Engineers is projecting Coralville Lakes outflow will hit 25,000 cubic feet per second on June 17.

Lombardo said the flow could be even higher in Iowa City if heavy rain hits locally, leading to his warning of possible 500-year flood levels. In 1993, the city reached 100 year flood levels but not 500 year, he said. The most recent National Weather Service forecast for the Iowa City-Coralville area called for dry skies today but a slight chance of rain Wednesday through Friday.

The UI project with the cofferdam, connecting the university’s east and west chilled water plants, was supposed to be finished by now but has been delayed about a year for a variety of reasons, including bad weather and high water on the river.

Current water levels make removing the cofferdam too dangerous, said Ken Lloyd, the UI’s associate utility director. “It’s essentially impossible to take it out not,” he said.

Worsening the situation, the Corps of Engineers predicted Coralville Lake would go over its spillway at 712 feet above sea level around midnight last night. At 10 p.m., it was at 711.36 feet. The only time the lake went over the spillway was in the devastating Flood of 1993, when the lake reached nearly 717 feet above sea level.

Coralville Lake is projected to hit 714.68 feet above sea level on June 17. Outflow was to increase to 20,000 cubic feet per second by this morning. That would raise river levels at least 2 feet by this afternoon, Iowa City said in a news release. By comparison, outflow was less than 8,600 cubic feet per second last Monday.

The predictions led at least a few homeowners on low-lying sections of Normandy Drive-- where the river was within 20 feet of many homes — to evacuate Monday. They included Greg and Linda Schrock, who planned to stay with their children and take anything with them they can't set up high.

"We're going to take care of us," said Greg Schrock, 65.

The predictions even worried those not hit in 1993. Lucky Pawz, a dog boarding business on Stevens Drive on the city's south side, was not around in 1993 and co-owner Jim Kelly said he's been told his building did not take on water during the floods. But most of those around it did.

"At this point I'm getting anxious with word it may be worse than in '93," he said during a break from sandbagging.

Even the arts are taking a hit. The Riverside Theatre Shakespeare Festival relocated from City Park to City High School for its opening weekend that starts Friday night.

In Coralville, water is knee deep on Edgewater Drive along the Iowa River, Assistant City Administer Ellen Habel said. Officials also were concerned about possible flooding of businesses along Highway 6.

-Contact the writer: (319) 339-3175 or gregg.hennigan@gazcomm.com

C.R. applies lessons learning in ‘93 to handle record flooding

By Rick Smith

The Gazette

Cedar Rapids — Public Works Director Dave Elgin late Monday afternoon was pointing to the U.S. Geological Survey’s forecast for a 21.5-foot crest of the Cedar River here Thursday, saying even Wednesday will be “unexplored” territory for the city.

Wednesday morning is when the Cedar River is slated to surpass the noteworthy 1993 flood mark of 19.27 feet.

The city’s multistep flood action plan is based on lessons learned from the 1993 event and from lesser floods since, including one in late April in which the river reached just above 17 feet in Cedar Rapids.

New lessons are going to be learned this time, too, Elgin said. The predicted 21.5-foot crest is more than 2 feet above the 1993 crest and it tops the record river level of 20 feet, which records say happened in 1929 and 1851.

City officials aren’t sitting by to watch the record-setting.

By late Monday afternoon, city crews were beginning to build temporary dikes-- two to provide additional protection to the Time Check Neighborhood in northwest Cedar Rapids, one to protect homes near the Czech Village, and one to protect Osborn Park and the Sinclair packing house site across the river from Czech Village.

Crews will use excess dirt on hand at the Eastern Iowa Airport for the dikes, Elgin said.

In addition, Elgin said, the permanent levee protecting the Time Check Neighborhood may not be high enough to prevent the river from spilling over at certain low spots if the river climbs to 21.5 feet. At 19.27 feet in 1993, the river was within a foot of some of the lower spots on the levee, he said.

As a result, city crews would be adding dirt at those spots as well, he said.

For now, the flooding is not expected to close Interstate 380, as happened in 1993.

City officials also weren’t worried about street bridges over the river, but the CRANDIC railroad span just downstream of the Eighth Avenue Bridge could be lost, Fire Chief Steve Havlik said last night.

“We’re going to lose that bridge if the water gets much higher,” he said.

Havlik told Gov. Chet Culver at a briefing last night that engineers are concerned the railroad bridge could float off its piers, but they also believe it’s too heavy to be carried very far downstream. The forecast for today is rain-free but showers and thunderstorms are expected late Wednesday and into Thursday. It was the rainfalls of 7 to 9 inches over the weekend in northern Iowa responsible for the record crests, with the Cedar expected to crest in Cedar Falls today, 4 feet above the all-time high, before heading south to Vinton and Cedar Rapids.

Elgin said city officials don’t know all that is coming at them

“We do expect there will be surprises,” he said.

City crews have a ready supply of sandbags should an emergency develop, he said.

Because of the unknowns, the city also is making plans to evacuate residents should the need arise.

At a Monday afternoon news conference, Dave Koch, the Fire Department's spokesman, said evacuations will not be mandatory. However, he urged residents to leave their homes for health concerns, if water levels approach electrical outlet, furnaces or appliances, or if public officials issue an evacuation notification. Residents of affected areas will be notified via a reverse 911 call system if such an evacuation is warranted.

Last night, water levels were nearing 17 feet, a level which sends water onto Edgewood Road and forces the closure of the busy Edgewood Road bridge.

The city's Elgin said he expects some residents will see water in their basements as a result of the record flood.

The areas of Time Check, Osborn Park, Ellis Road NW west of Edgewood Road, A Street in Czech Village and the Cedar Valley Neighborhood in the Rompot Street area all had potential to see problems.

At the same time, Elgin noted the city replaced a major trunk sewer line serving the Time Check Neighborhood following the 1993 flood, which has protected the neighborhood from widespread sewer backups since.

The city urged residents to stay away from the rising water because it can contain bacteria from human and animal waste.

In some instances, the city's sanitary sewer lines will become overloaded from rainwater seeping into them, necessitating a discharge into the river, Elgin said.

The city's Water Pollution Control plant, which at times of heavy rain receives 80 million gallons of effluent a day, is now receiving 120 million gallons, which is the plant's treatment capacity, Steve Hershner, the plant's environmental manager, said Monday.

Dave Smith, the city's parks superintendent, noted Monday afternoon that the Cedar River already had overtaken the community garden plots at Ellis Park.

A few gardeners were wading in water trying to dig out young plants, he said.

Steve Gravelle of the Gazette contributed to this story.

-Contact the writer: (319) 398-8312

Flood-prone UI adjusting as classes start today

By Diane Heldt

The Gazette

Iowa City — University of Iowa officials are scrambling to find new locations for 17 classes by Wednesday as the flooding Iowa River threatens parts of campus just as the UI's main summer class session kicks off today.

An undetermined number of faculty and staff with offices in UI buildings along the Iowa River's west bank were told to remove all essential personal items by 5 p.m. today "with the anticipation they may not be able to get back into their offices by Aug. 1," UI spokeswoman Linda Kettner said Monday.

"Access to those buildings could be curtailed at any time with short notice because of the rising river," She said.

Normal activity on the arts campus has been suspended and the Museum of Art is closed until further notice. UI officials were trying to relocate temporarily faculty and staff with offices in Hancher Auditorium, Voxman Music Building, the Theatre Building, the Museum of Art, the Art Building and Art Building West.

Kettner said sump pumps in those buildings are keeping water out. "I think we're doing a pretty good job holding on and preparing," she said, although officials were concerned about the North Hall closed.

Summer classes starting this week also will be moved from those buildings, Kettner said. Three had to be moved by today and the others by Wednesday.

UI students should check the Student Information System (ISIS) at isis.uiowa.edu for updates. General campus updates: www.uiowa.edu.

- Contact the writer: (319) 339-3158 or diane.heldt@gazcomm.com

Graphics

(Pg. 6A)

Cedar River stages

The following is a partial list of problems that arise when the Cedar River rises to the following levels in the Cedar Rapids metro area, according to the U.S. Geological Service. The river was at 16.9 feet last night:

- 24.2 feet — Water reaches the bottom of the First Avenue Bridge in downtown Cedar Rapids.
- 22.5 — Water reaches the top of levee along First Street SW in Cedar Rapids.
- 22.2 — Water reaches the bottom of the Second Avenue Bridge in downtown Cedar Rapids.
- 20.2 — Water reaches the bottom of the Third Avenue Bridge and affects several homes along the river on First Street NW in Cedar Rapids.
- 19.5 — Water reaches the bottom of the Blairs Ferry Road Bridge
- 19.0 — Water reaches the bottom of a railroad bridge near First Street and I Avenue NW.
- 18.5 — Water affects the lowest residences in Palo.
- 18.2 — Water reaches the bottom of the railroad bridge along Eighth Avenue in Cedar Rapids.
- 18.0 — Water affects the lowest sections of Edgewood Road NW between Ellis Road NW and the Cedar River.
- 17.7 — Water affects the lowest sections of the main road on Ellis Road NW and lowest sections of Blairs Ferry Road near the Cedar River.
- 17.3 — Water affects Edgewood Road NW between Ellis Road NW and the Cedar River.
- 16.5 — Water affects the lowest sections of Ellis Road NW.
- 15.5 — Water affects the lowest sections of Old River Road SW.
- 15.2 — Water affects the parks along the river between First Avenue and Second Avenue and between Second Avenue and Third Avenue.
- 14.2 — Water affects the lowest sections of C Street SW near Prairie Creek.
- 13.5 — Water affects the lowest sections of Palo.
- 12.7 — Water affects the Palo water treatment plant.
- 11.5 — Water affects Osborn Park in Cedar Rapids.
- 9.5 — Water affects the lowest sections of Otis Road SE.

(Pg. 7A)

Flooding Impact

- Gov. Chet Culver has declared 43 Iowa counties state disaster areas, making them eligible for state aid. The list includes these counties in Eastern Iowa: Allamakee, Benton, Black Hawk, Bremer, Buchanan, Butler, Chickasaw, Clayton, Delaware, Dubuque, Fayette, Johnson, Linn, Iowa, Tama and Winneshiek, Lower-income Iowans can apply for grants of up to \$3,000 to help recover from flood damage.

Linn County

- Cedar Rapids has set up a 24-hour non-emergency helpline to assist citizens who have questions about flooding. The number is (319)286-5770. The number will be answered by Cedar Rapids police, who asked people to save 911 for emergencies.
- The Edgewood Road Bridge was to be closed last night.
- Red Cross shelters will be opened at the American Red Cross office, 6300 Rockwell Dr. NE; and Zion Lutheran Church, 201 First Ave., Hiawatha.
- Volunteers are needed to help sandbag around the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library in Czech Village from 8 a.m. to noon today. Wear work clothes and gloves and bring a shovel, if you have one.

- Boat ramps on the Cedar River are closed. Also closed: Fish Court Park off Old River Road SW; Robbins Lake Park by Ellis Boulevard NW' Otis Road SE, between 44th Street SE to Bertram Road SE; Cedar Bend Lane SW; Riverside Drive SW (the state park); Ellis Boulevard NW between Ellis Lane and 16th Street NW.
- The Cedar Rapids Animal Shelter, 1401 Cedar Bend Lane, Ely, is closed to the public because of flooding. The Fire Department will transport shelter staff into the facility by boat to care for the animals each day. It's anticipated the shelter will be closed until at least Monday.

Johnson County

- American Red Cross shelter is opened at Johnson County Fairgrounds, 4261 Oakcrest Hill Rd. SE, Building A, Iowa City.
- Rocky Shore Drive in Iowa City is closed between River Street and Highway 6.
- Road crossing the Coralville Dam closed.
- Hills access at 4210 520th St. SE and the River Junction Access at 6051 River Junction Rd. closed.
- The following roads are closed in Johnson County: River Junction Road SE, Sand Road SE, Black Hawk Ave SW, Black Diamond Road SW, Izaak Walton Road, Park Road Bridge, Normandy Drive, Fourth avenue from Highway 6 to Fifth Street, Grabin Road NW, Cemetery Road NW, Blain Cemetery Road NW, Amana Road NW, Sandy Beach Road NE, 140th St. NE, Naples Ave NE, Hoosier Creek Road NE.
- Park Road Bridge in Iowa City closing today.
- Boating prohibited on the Iowa River from Coralville Dam spillway south to the Hills blacktop.
- Mehaffey Bridge Boat Ramp to close no later than Friday, leaving no public boat ramps on Coralville Lake.
- Johnson County Public Health Department recommends that people in flooding areas receive a tetanus booster shot if they haven't had one in the past 10 years.
- Johnson County Emergency Management Agency requesting large diameter pumps for Iowa City, Coralville and other Johnson County locations. Call (319) 688-6020 if you can help.
- Residents who wish to help sandbag may contact Emergency Management: (319) 688-8961.
- UI Museum of Art closed.
- UI summer opera performances, scheduled for July 12,13,18,19, canceled.
- Friday's broadcast of the "Know the Score LIVE" moved from the UI Museum of Art to Iowa City Public Library Meeting Room A.

Northwest Iowa

- An American Red Cross shelter is open at the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School, 1002 G Ave., Vinton; and at the University of Northern Iowa, West Gymnasium, Cedar Falls.
- Highway 52 is closed north of Decorah. Other road closings, 2B
- Community shelters open at Decorah Middle School, 405 Winnebago St.; Decorah United Methodist Church, 302 W. Broadway St.; Decorah Congregational United Church of Christ, 209 Broadway St., Decorah Lutheran Church, 309 Winnebago St.

Photos

(Pg. 1A)

Katie Prichard, a Luther College junior from Northfield, Minn., walks past a row of sandbags around the Regents Center at Luther College in Decorah on Monday. The levee near the college was breached, spilling water over the athletic fields and parking lots and into the basement of the Regents Center.

Residents sandbag homes on Normandy drive in Iowa City as flood-waters continue to rise along the Iowa River on Monday. Water was within 20 feet of many Normandy home Monday.

(Pg. 6A)

Jonathan D. Woods/The Gazette

Water flows around the cofferdam parting the Iowa River just north of the West Iowa Avenue bridge in Iowa City on Monday. Water levels are higher than projected upstream of the dam because of the restricted flow. The cofferdam was installed by the University of Iowa so crews could install two 36-inch pipes connecting the east and west chilled water plants at the university.

Jonathan D. Woods/ The Gazette

Actor Joshua Murphy stops by Lower City Park to take a picture of the Riverside Theatre in Iowa City on Monday. Murphy is part of the production, which will be relocated to a new venue because of flood. Water over the spillway cannot be controlled. "Which early on isn't so critical, but if we start getting up 3,4,5, feet above the spillway, that's a pretty considerable flow we can't stop," lake operations manager John Castle said.

(Pg. 7A)

Orlan Love/ The Gazette

Sabrina Grell of Waterloo (front) and Rod Ackerman of rural Cedar falls paddle through new Hartford streets Monday after rescuing Grell's two cats, Lilly and Allie. The cats had been left Sunday night at the New Hartford residence of Grell's aunt when the town was ordered evacuated in the wake of onrushing floodwaters from rain-swollen Beaver Creek.

Liz Martin/ The Gazette

Jean Daywitt of Decorah talks with Wellington Place residents Harriet Par (left) and Marlis Zweibohmer at the community shelter at Decorah Lutheran Church on Monday. The church was one of four shelters set up in Decorah, and specifically set up for residents of assisted living, independent living and other senior living centers.

Liz Martin/The Gazette

Volunteers unload sandbags from a truck into a canoe to place around the Regents Center at Luther College in Decorah on Monday. The levee near the college was breached, spilling water over the athletic fields and parking lots and into the basement of the Regents Center.