

Coping with the Cleanup

As the river recedes, communities tackle the aftermath

BY PAT KROCHMAL - Des Plaines Times

(June 3, 2004) With the muddy water of the Des Plaines River receding, Des Plaines residents began the arduous process of cleaning up the aftermath.

The fallout from the May flood of 2004 could have been far worse if the record inundations of rainfall that were predicted had materialized. Because thunderstorms missed the city twice last week, the river did not rise as much as expected.

But the water that rushed the city was more than enough.

The brown waves that roared downstream from Gurnee had been expected to crest here on May 27 at 11.3 feet - 6.3 feet above flood stage - breaking the 10.88 feet flood record set Oct. 1, 1986. Instead, the river officially reached its peak at 8.52 feet about 1:23 p.m. May 28, still inundating yards and threatening homes near Big Bend Lake and Shagbark Lake, but sparing many houses and businesses along its banks that had been deluged during previous storms.

Damage control

Among the worst hit was the home of Thomas Hooper, a resident of Big Bend Drive, which lies between the river and Big Bend Lake. He needed a boat to survey the damage.

The National Weather service reported the river water level at 8.2 feet by 7 a.m. May 28. It also reported that the water was expected to fall below flood stage by Memorial Day.

"We were as ready as we could be," said Des Plaines Mayor Anthony Arredia, who signed a Declaration of Civil Emergency May 25 setting a curfew and focusing all city services on the flooding.

"People were wonderful, just wonderful! People from all over brought food for the volunteers. Some people even came from Gurnee to help fight the flood water!" Arredia added.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who toured the area by helicopter May 26, declared it a disaster site to make it eligible for financial assistance.

"I'm inspired by the way this community has pulled together," he said during a news conference.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL.), who toured Des Plaines with Arredia to see the devastation first-hand May 25, returned the next day to stuff sandbags.

Irene Serwa, whose Crabtree Lane home had flooded badly before, was greatly relieved by the slowly receding waters.

"The water has not come close! I hurt all over from hauling sand bags. One of the people helping said her hands hurt so much from tying the bags that she couldn't hold a cup of coffee," Serwa said. "But this was a drill! Everything was done like it should have been done from the automatic telephone calls we received warning us about flood conditions to the public works men dumping the sand!"

Pros and cons

Not that everything was perfect. Three men stole some sandbags that were protecting Serwa's home. And three teens were suspected of stealing the cell phone of a Maine West High School volunteer as she packed sand bags.

However, authorities reported no injuries and the numerous good deeds far outnumbered the few bad ones.

School District 62's North Elementary School, 1789 Rand Road, was scheduled to reopen on June 2, after rising water closed it May 25.

"There was supposed to be a reward field trip for the patrol guards at the end of the week. We had to cancel that and a lot of other activities that the students and the staff had been looking forward to," said Principal Terri Carmen.

"It is so close to the end of the year, we can't rebook, so there a lot of disappointed staff and children," she added.

Some of the youngsters were really not that upset about missing classes.

In fact, Tony Walsh, 6, thought it was "Great!" He said he didn't mind a few days off.

"He would love to play in the water, but he stayed home and played video games instead. It's safer," said his mother, Kris.

Robin Lee, 8, and his mother, Jieun Huh, said he was literally excited about having some free time.

However, Robin's friend, Jimmy Park, also 8, was not.

"All that hard work - I don't miss that! But I missed playing soccer," he said.

Planning ahead

The teachers had raised everything they could at least 2 feet off the floor on May 26, since the building became an island the last time the river flooded.

"Then, the water streamed into the basement, but not the classrooms. We were hoping we would be so lucky again," said Principal Terri Carmen.

"We sandbagged the 'univents' in the walls and all the other openings around the building. We brought in an automatic machine to fill more sandbags. We also needed a boat, because we planned to have a man here 24 hours around the clock to pump out the water that does come in. We needed a boat to relieve each shift," she added.

Parents and teachers contacted everybody who might help through a phone tree. Dozens volunteered. And when the group finished shoring up the school, they went down the street to the home of a woman without help to sandbag her home.

Barbara Bashas, a Des Plaines resident who is a student and an employee at Oakton Community College, 1616 E. Golf Road, was pleased that the school was set to reopen June 2.

She not only had been shut out of her early childhood education classes, but also out of her work in the education department until the water covering Golf, River, East River and Central roads bordering the campus receded.

She and other students will be able to make up the classes they missed on June 4 and 5. All other business was moved to the college's Skokie campus.

The Science and Arts Academy for gifted students, located near a bend in the river at Miner and Busse Streets, opened its doors last Tuesday after sandbagging the building and canceling classes last Thursday and Friday.

Blessings

And now the congregation of the St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church, 2350 E. Dempster St., which was inundated during the previous floods, can continue making plans to celebrate its 45th anniversary on dry ground.

"We didn't have any sump pumps before. We had no preparation for flooding before. This time, we had three or four days to get ready," said George Chiagouris of Niles, a retired civil engineer and a member the mayor's committee on flood control.

"This time, we had three defense mechanisms," he added.

The first line of defense was the 3-foot wall of sandbags. The second, the sump pumps. The third was lifting everything 4 feet off the floor in case our first two measures failed.

"In 1986 and 1987, the whole complex was under 3 feet of water. The water went up the stairs of the church and inside the gymnasium, school and meeting rooms. It caused about \$300,000 damage," Chiagouris said. "We are planning a big celebration Nov. 14. We will launch an \$8-million fundraising drive to add an addition and put a second floor on the school building," he added.

However, Chiagouris, who is also chairman of the expansion committee, decided that if the church was to expand, serious flood control would have to be incorporated into the plans.

"It cost money to fix the damage, but the major damage of the flooding was the disruption. It took about three months to recover from it," Chiagouris said. "It took time to get rid of everything that was damaged, clean up and buy new stuff while we had to provide services and school elsewhere. We don't ever want to do it again!"