

Water Creeps Higher

By Amy McLaughlin Daily Herald Staff Writer
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Tuesday's sun peeked out once in awhile as they trudged through back yards, surveyed flooded garages and offered hugs to weary workers.

Des Plaines Mayor Tony Arredia and U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky saw firsthand the creeping monster that residents in Des Plaines and others who live near the Des Plaines River are fighting.

Water levels in the Des Plaines River are slowly increasing as officials in towns like Mount Prospect, Des Plaines, Wheeling and Prospect Heights brace for flooding. Evacuations have already started in some parts of Des Plaines and Wheeling.

In other towns with areas close to the river, people are stacking sandbags and moving valuables out of basements.

Concern is reaching a fever pitch in Des Plaines. Officials are expecting the river to crest at 9 feet Friday -- 4 feet above flood stage. The river was more than 7 feet Tuesday morning and continued to climb throughout the day.

Arredia signed a declaration of civil emergency in Des Plaines Tuesday. It will allow the city to impose a curfew and redirect all city services to flood relief, if necessary.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich is expected to survey areas most affected by flooding today. Des Plaines city leaders said they got word late Tuesday of the governor's possible visit.

All along the Des Plaines River, residents and local officials are keeping a close eye on neighbors to the north in Gurnee, where roads have been closed and people have been forced to evacuate their houses, schools and businesses.

In Des Plaines, Tuesday marked another day of long labor for most, hauling 60- to 70-pound sandbags and stacking them meticulously to make a wall. Des Plaines alone has used at least 150,000 sandbags so far.

Arredia and Schakowsky offered emotional support along with promises to help with cleanup and federal and state efforts to prevent this from happening again.

Schakowsky, an Evanston Democrat whose district includes most of Des Plaines, said she was impressed by the way people were helping each other prepare for the coming crisis.

"I saw people of great spirit, working hard," Schakowsky said. "It's scary, as a homeowner myself, when I think of this creeping threat over hours and hours."

Schakowsky said she plans to join the huge volunteer effort today by filling sandbags at the Des Plaines public works facility.

Arredia and Schakowsky visited the federal Rand Park/Levee 50 project along Busse Highway east of downtown. The partially finished pumping station is under water but is still providing some relief for houses and businesses nearby.

Arredia and Schakowsky bemoaned the fact that it is the first of six multimillion-dollar projects to control Des Plaines River flooding. It and the others were planned after the record floods of 1986 and 1987.

"Without getting into a lot of finger-pointing, this should have been done 10 years ago," Arredia said.

They also noted that an effort to create a storm water management commission to coordinate flood-control efforts in Cook County is finally getting off the ground. Local officials from towns along the Des Plaines River have been pushing for that for years.

Legislation to name the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago to that role now awaits the governor's signature.

Arredia and Schakowsky also spent a lot of time visiting homeowners along Big Bend Drive, a small peninsula just northeast of downtown and surrounded by the river.

Residents there are watching the river slowly creep into their back yards and are calling on friends and relatives to help them hang plastic in front of their doors and stack sandbags around their houses.

In Wheeling, residents in the Fox Point mobile home park on Milwaukee Avenue have been evacuated.

The village set up a temporary shelter at the Wheeling Park District Recreation Center. ComEd cut power to Fox Point at noon on Tuesday.

In neighboring Mount Prospect, village leaders reported Tuesday that they've had no major

flooding problems.

Village crews are pumping out the storm sewer system to prevent backups when the river starts to flood. Major sandbag efforts are going on in Mount Prospect, too.

Des Plaines city officials said they've also gotten some reports of sewer backups from other areas of town.

In Prospect Heights, volunteers are sandbagging along River Road to protect the condominium developments nearby. City officials are expecting to keep the sandbags there for a week after the river crests.

In Des Plaines, several buildings are being evacuated.

Oakton Community College closed its Des Plaines campus, which is next to the Des Plaines River. Officials expect to reopen it June 1.

Holy Family Health Care Center on Dempster Street was evacuated Tuesday, and classes at North Elementary School, 1789 Rand Road, have been canceled starting today through next Tuesday.