

Business owners, residents, determined to remain in Chimney Rock Village

October 7, 2024 | Daily Courier, The (Forest City, NC) Author: SCOTT CARPENTER scarpenter@thedigitalcourier.com| Section: Archives | 1136 Words OpenURL Link

CHIMNEY ROCK — More than a week has passed, since Hurricane Helene barreled through western North Carolina, knocking out power to millions, and destroying homes, roads, and businesses. Chimney Rock Village and the town of Lake Lure were the hardest hit areas of Rutherford County, though power was disrupted across the entire county causing long lines for gas and ice, and general hardship for many.

Chimney Rock and Lake Lure are still teeming with law enforcement officers from many agencies including local police, the Rutherford County Sheriff's Office, state troopers, and even the FBI. Many of the in-state law enforcement officers are from agencies as far away as Beaufort County on the North Carolina coast, to add support to Rutherford County. Some are here from New York and other states.

Aid workers remain in the area, along with emergency responders, and a host of power company workers —some from as far away as Canada, road construction crews, the North Carolina Department of Transportation and others.

With each passing day, more and more progress is being made. Officials continue to discourage citizens from attempting to travel in Lake Lure and Chimney Rock Village, or being in the area, unless you are a resident and it is essential. Through the weekend, checkpoints remained in place at certain locations including the intersection of Highway 9 and Highway 64/74.

While power company crews continue to work around the clock, there are still some stretches along Chimney Rock Road between Rutherfordton and Lake Lure (Highway 64/74), through the weekend, were one-lane to make room for the repair crews.

Over the weekend, along the flat stretches of highway, sand could still be seen on Chimney Rock Road, between the Green Hill Community and the Lake Lure Dam. And along the flatter areas close to the Broad River, it was evident that high wind had taken down many trees and some structures that were close the river.

From the highway, above the dam, the water in Lake Lure is visibly muddy, but improving. That is perhaps the most notable sign that a storm had blown through, until one reaches the area near the Lake Lure Inn. That is when the dramatic, shocking scenes of the destruction of the town marina and the entire area around the town hall become visible.

Workers with heavy machinery continue to move mountains of dirt, mud and rubbish. A destroyed police vehicle can still be seen.

Many of the structures that once sat along the banks of the river in Chimney Rock were demolished, and the remnants are in the river, near the bridge.

The original bridge, that had been transformed into the beautiful, world-famous Lake Lure Flowering Bridge, is nearly unrecognizable. The Chimney Rock side of the Flowering Bridge — once connected to land that included small structures, picnic tables, and parking lot — has mostly vanished with the storm.

Main Street, Chimney Rock, where most business are located as well as the entrance to Chimney Rock Park, runs alongside the Broad River. Structures on the river side of the street suffered more damage than the other side, which has a somewhat higher elevation. Many riverside structures suffered heavy damage, some completely demolished, and some were completely swept away by the river.

Some buildings and businesses on the west side of the entrance to Chimney Rock Park were among those that are now gone — he land they sat upon now washed away. The parking area that was once in front of Burnt Shirt Vineyards Tasting Room and a section of Main Street, were all taken out by the storm.

Captain Gary Brown, of the Beaufort County Sheriff's Department, has spent several days with a law enforcement team in the Chimney Rock-Lake Lure area. He has worked in many areas in the aftermath of hurricanes.

"Looking at this damage... There is no comparison," Brown said. "This kind of storm is much harder on a mountain region than in a flatter area. Rescues are harder, recovery will be harder."

Through it all, there is a sense of hope.

Nick and Kristen Sottile are the owners of Chimney Rock Smokehouse, as well as the Broad River Inn and the Stage Coach Saloon and a mini golf course.

The Chimney Rock Smokehouse was mostly unscathed. But the other businesses, located riverside, were massive losses. The inn was destroyed, with about two feet of mud on the first floor. The restaurant and saloon were "split in half," and the mini golf course was washed away.

The Sottiles say their hearts are broken, but their spirits remain intact. They maintain a sense of hope.

Their home in Chimney Rock sat farther up on the hill and endured the storm. The house is powered by generators. The Sottiles are temporarily housing 13 additional people. Some are extended family members, some were employees. All are people they care about.

Over the last week and a half, the couple have been busy, like many in the storm zone. Nick is also a volunteer with the Chimney Rock Fire Department.

"We are trying to remain hopeful," Kristin said Friday. "But the devastation...It's a lot. So many people lost everything — their home, their business —everything."

Chimney Rock Village is a tight-knit community. Most of the business owners know each other and pull for each to succeed. Many are close friends.

Nick and Kristen say they are grateful for what they still have — grateful they are able to help others who don't have a place to live. Some of their friends were not as fortunate.

Their future is filled with uncertainty. But Nick and Kristen are staying busy doing what they can.

They noted how many are in the village now, working to rebuild a road, to re-route the river, to bring the heart of the village back to some sort of normal. Nick and Kristen know it will take a long time.

"We don't know how long. But the road workers have made a lot of progress, in just one week," Nick pointed out.

Asked about their plans for the future, Nick said, "We don't really know about the next five minutes."

After a pause, he added, "We have no plans to leave. This is our home."

This couple has one request for the public.

"We want people to stop saying that Chimney Rock is gone," Kristen said. "There are real people who live here, with real lives. Hardworking people, who are still working to be able to stay here."

Nick says every Main Street business owner that he had spoken with shares his resolve to remain in Chimney Rock.

As they work to rebuild their village, and their lives, Kristen and Nick are appreciative of all the support that is coming in to the area. They are glad to see the law enforcement, the road crews, the utility workers and all the aid workers from various agencies.

Chimney Rock may look a bit different in the future.

"Chimney Rock isn't gone," Kristen added. "We are here."

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Blue Cross NC offers relief for members

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To provide immediate relief, Blue Cross NC is implementing measures to increase the availability of health care services and help members access the care they need as quickly as possible, according to a press release from Blue Cross NC.

Blue Cross NC has made emergency adjustments to its policies to help members in western North Carolina get the care they need:

Blue Cross NC is contacting members with critical health needs to connect them to care and needed supplies.

Members and employers in impacted areas have an extra 30 days to pay their premiums.

Telehealth is available for members who aren't able to see a provider in person, including telephone or audio-only visits.

Members can request early prescription refills to restore lost or missing medications and opt to transfer their prescriptions to a different pharmacy if their regular pharmacy is not available. To locate an open pharmacy in western North Carolina, visit https://www.ncbop.org/emergencyoperatingpharmacieshelene.html.

These measures will remain in effect through the state of disaster declaration and will be re-evaluated as necessary. Additional information on these flexibilities is available at www.bluecrossnc.com/helene, and doctors, hospitals and other providers can find the latest updates on the Provider News Page, according to the press release.

Members who have questions about their coverage or who need help accessing care, should call the number on the back of their member ID card, according to the press release.

Members who are in crisis and have access to communications should use these resources:

Visit the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (NCDPS) page for up-to-date information.

Visit ReadyNC.gov for information on shelters, evacuations, road conditions and more.

Call 2-1-1 or 1-888-892-1162, a hotline provided by United Way of North Carolina to receive free and confidential information on health and human services within their community.

Get confidential counseling, referrals or other support anytime by calling the Disaster Distress Hotline at 1-800-985-5990.

You can apply for assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency by visiting FEMA.gov or calling 1-800-621-3362 between 7 a.m.-11 p.m. daily.

Blue Cross NC members can access available mental health resources by connecting with a behavioral health care navigator.

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Leaders combat conspiracy theories surrounding hurricane recovery

October 7, 2024 | Daily Courier, The (Forest City, NC) Author: SCOTT CARPENTER scarpenter@thedigitalcourier.com| Section: Archives | 353 Words OpenURL Link

RUTHERFORDTON — Despite what a variety of wild, often outrageous conspiracy theories are suggesting, according to local leaders including elected officials, law enforcement professionals and residents, there is no nefarious operation taking place in Chimney Rock Village and the town of Lake Lure.

There are no illegal, clandestine meetings taking place, where elaborate plots are being hatched for the "take over" of Chimney Rock Village, nor Lake Lure, nor any part of Rutherford County in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

But the rumors and conspiracy theories do create more distrust, raise anxiety and cause fear, if the public begins to believe them, officials said. These conspiracy theories have become so prevalent, that it has caught the attention of national media outlets.

The New York Times recently contacted Sheriff Aaron Ellenburg and County Commission Chairman Bryan King. Both emphasized that the disinformation some people choose to spread on social media is harmful to the legitimate recovery efforts.

Ellenburg has repeatedly emphasized that there have not been "numerous bodies" discovered, nor were they later bulldozed to cover them up. And there is no "martial law" in place.

One of the more bizarre theories was that the government wanted to take over Chimney Rock, in order to mine for lithium.

"The only lithium for sale in Rutherford County is at the local Lowes stores in a 9-volt battery," said King Monday.

"These conspiracy theories — it's just disheartening to see that."

"So many people have come together and are working very hard," King continued. "Rutherford County Emergency Management is working hard. Law enforcement coordinated through Sheriff Aaron Ellenburg. There are FEMA representatives in Rutherford County, and the process has started to access emergency FEMA funding. Many local entities are working hard. The people promoting the conspiracy theories are only making a difficult situation worse."

King added, "We are working to restore our communities. They are not being 'seized' or 'taken over' by anyone."

Ellenburg said those spreading the lies, spreading the conspiracy theories, need to stop.

"They are people who want to stir up trouble. They are not helping at all. They are hurting, causing more people to panic," Ellenburg said. "This needs to stop."

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The great floods of 1916 and 2024

October 7, 2024 | Daily Dispatch, The (Henderson, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Archives | 528 Words OpenURL Link

One of Miss Letitia Currie's favorite topics in her history class in the 1950s at Davidson Junior High School was the Great Flood of 1916.

Miss Currie was the daughter of a Davidson College professor. Many of her students also knew what she was talking about because their parents had experienced that 1916 flood and talked about it whenever rain poured down hard.

Today, many of Miss Currie's students, their parents and grandparents, great-grandparents, and their children and grandchildren are having a similar experience dealing with the flooding that followed Hurricane Helene. And they will be talking about it for the rest of their lives, calling it "The great flood of 2024."

"News of Davidson," the news outlet in my hometown, published the following account by Gatewood Payne Campbell, granddaughter of Davidson professor Gatey Workman and niece of the late, great opera singer William Workman.

Gatewood and her husband Johnny live near Black Mountain.

"Life has stopped," she said. "We don't know dates or times. Sirens are 24 hours a day. It's relentless. Helicopters invade our sky. Chainsaws sound nonstop and we run outside in hopes it's in our neighborhood. ...

"Let me back up. We awoke around 6 Friday morning without power. The storm was loud and pounding but we didn't know where we were in the storm. We could not get updates. Around 8:30 we lost internet across cell lines. I called a friend and got her to look at radar and let me know an ETA on rain ending.

"That was the last call I was able to make. By 9:30 ALL cell signal was completely lost. The rain was increasing. We could see the creek rising. Johnny stepped outside under the porch and was soaked from head to toe after 30 seconds.

"Around 11 we felt like we could go out and survey the neighborhood. We began to feel the weight of the destruction, yet we had NO clue. The creek had turned into a river greater than 50 yards wide. The noise of water heaters, propane tanks, bikes, grills, construction supplies and yard equipment banging on the rails of our bridge to BlackMountain was deafening. We saw two neighbors with trees on their homes and knew they were taking on water."

Meanwhile in Asheville, Bryan King and his wife Angela Koh are assessing the damage to their 12 Bones Smokehouse on Foundry Street in the River Arts District. As I wrote in my book, "North Carolina's Eateries," "Even if 12 Bones had not been made famous by Barack Obama's visits there, it would be a 'must-do' in Asheville."

When I first visited 12 Bones several years ago, it was located closer to the French Broad River. Had Bryan and Angela not moved the restaurant few blocks up the hill it would have been completely washed away. At its current location they may be able to repair and survive.

Angela's sister writes, "As the floodwaters recede, we see catastrophic damage to homes and businesses, including the River Arts District, where 12 Bones was founded. Entire livelihoods have been lost. In nearly every direction you look, everything is caked in mud and scattered debris. Broken wood and mangled wiring now stand where intersections once existed."

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Luv' N' Flame heads west to cook hot meals

October 7, 2024 | Daily Herald (Roanoke Rapids, NC) Author: Richard Holm rholm@rrdailyherald.com| Section: Local| 550 Words OpenURL Link

LITTLETON — The Luv' N' Flame food truck headed west Monday morning to serve hot meals to North Carolinians impacted by Hurricane Helene.

According to the National Weather Service, Hurricane Helene became a Category 4 storm on the evening of Sept. 26 and made landfall in the Big Bend of the Florida Gulf Coast. The storm caused widespread flooding, resulting in fatalities and property damage. The storm's impact reached across many southern states, including in areas of western NC.

As North Carolinians rallied to these areas in the wake of the devastation, groups across the Roanoke Valley have stepped up to donate resources and travel west to provide aid to those without necessities and hope.

Luv' N' Flame, a family-owned food truck business catering throughout the Roanoke Valley and Lake Gaston area, decided to step up.

Owners Dominick and Nancy Fraioli and their son William Stanescki began taking in donations last week in preparation to venture out toward Boone, where they will meet up with some linemen and a church group.

"We're going to feed them and feed whoever we can and donate whatever they need," Nancy said. "Everything was donated from the area — everybody — the whole community. We got more food than you could imagine. Everything we needed was donated."

The crew received about 500 pounds of ground beef, 100 pounds of brisket and 100 pounds of pulled pork from Baldwin Beef Farm Store, as well as other donations from the community, such as bread, gas, and propane, to take on the trip.

Nancy said they already cooked 12 briskets and 10 pulled porks.

"So when we get there, we can start right away, and then as the days go on, we'll cook more as we're there," she said. "So many people just lost everything, and there's so many people helping. We just want to feed whoever we can. Hot meals for anybody, instead of a cold bag lunch. We cook, and cook with love is what we're going to do."

Dominick praised the community and donors for making it possible to make the trip to help the communities out west.

"We're just very blessed that they were able to do that," he said. "If it wasn't for our community and those people, we wouldn't be making this trip. So we're just grateful for all that, and just get to these people and do what we need to do to do our ministry."

Stanescki, who is also a veteran of the Connecticut National Guard as a horizontal construction engineer, said he feels motivated to get out there and help out.

"We don't have much to offer, but the least we could do is offer our time and our knowledge and give back to people who need it right now," he said. "But I'm excited to go."

A Luv' N' Flame banner hung on the side of the crew's food truck, signed by donors with encouraging messages of hope for those in the area they will visit.

Nancy said they hope to have other people in their travel sign the rest of the banner and it will someday hang inside their future brick-and-mortar restaurant. She said they are expecting to return Thursday.

The crew also thanked Tracy Story, Haggerty's Steakhouse, Keith Lang, B&J's Cash and Carry, Stony Creek Medical Center, Weldon Mills Theatre, Ace Hardware of Lake Gaston and Franklin Baking Company.

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Buddy Isles Tire, Automotive team delivers donations to western NC: Business taking donations, planning Oct. 18 trip

October 7, 2024 | Daily Herald (Roanoke Rapids, NC) Author: Richard Holm rholm@rrdailyherald.com| Section: Local| 755 Words OpenURL Link

LITTLETON — As many came together in support of those impacted by Hurricane Helene, the Buddy Isles Tire and Automotive team collected and organized donations to deliver to the distressed area.

According to the National Weather Service, Hurricane Helene became a Category 4 storm on the evening of Sept. 26 and made landfall in the Big Bend of the Florida Gulf Coast. The storm caused widespread flooding, resulting in fatalities and property damage. The storm's impact reached across many southern states, including in areas of western NC.

On Friday, Alyssa Vick, marketing director for BITA located at 231 U.S. Highway 158 in Littleton, said their team saw the destruction the storm caused across Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and the western part of North Carolina. Vick said their team decided there was a need to do something to help out and have a donation drive.

"We're home right here in the Carolinas, so it just hit really hard for us," she said.

Vick said they began taking in donations for a week, where people not just in Littleton, but the surrounding area, business owners, Halifax County and Littleton libraries, Lake Gaston Dog Boarding and others contributed.

"A lot of people have actually contributed to this," she said. "So as it's not us, it's actually our community that's done this. It's really humbling. My brother's a lineman, and hearing stories from him how he's out there on the front lines, it really puts your eyes in perspective of how truly blessed you really are when something like this happens."

The BITA team were organizing the donations, consolidating food and water onto pallets, as well as baby diapers and wipes, pet food and other necessities. Books were organized into boxes, and bags of clothing and other necessities were loaded into a U-Haul for the trip.

Bryan Isles, parts manager for the business, and his wife, Angie, were set to head out with their 24- and 25-year-old daughters, and an employee and his son.

Bryan said their destination was to a church in Hendersonville, which is an area impacted by the storm.

"We are going to deliver anything that we can to either them or six of the other churches in the area they said that may need some help," he said. "And then if there's anything that we can do after dropping off the supplies, we're going to stay and help clean up and fix anything and everything that we can do."

Bryan said Hendersonville was not as bad as other surrounding areas of that location.

"Within a 10-minute drive, I mean, everything's demolished," he said. "I mean, you can't get in, can't get out, type deal. So it's pretty bad. But they're lucky enough that the church is good, and we're able to meet there to distribute everything. So that worked out good."

Bryan said they try to help out with any kind of disaster that occurs whenever they can.

"If we don't gather up a bunch of stuff, we try to at least go out to help clean up or pick up, do anything like that," he said.

When asked about how he felt about venturing out to help others in need in the wake of the storm, Bryan highlighted the response from North Carolinians in a time of need.

"I mean, it feels great to be able to do it, because I feel like that if it happened to us, if the roles were reversed, the people from the west would have come out to us in the same fashion," he said. "So I just feel like we got a really good state, I guess you could say, because not everybody's like that. We got a guy here from Oregon, and his wife told him last night she can't believe that anybody is doing this, because in Oregon, with the fires and all that they have, she said they don't do that. It's just kind of fend for yourself. So it's new to her. She couldn't believe it."

The crew headed out Saturday morning and returned home Sunday afternoon.

On Monday, Vick said they were able to deliver the truckload to the church in Hendersonville and located another facility in Burnsville and provided assistance with distributing items and clean up efforts. She said BITA is continuing to accept donations and that there is a need for personal protective equipment and winter clothing such as coats, gloves, scarves, hats, hand and feet warmers and anything else to keep families warm.

"Temperatures drop much faster in the mountains than when they do around here," Vick said.

She said another trip is planned on Oct. 18.

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ONWASA utility crew departs to WNC to assist with Hurricane Helene recovery efforts

October 7, 2024 | Daily News, The (Jacksonville, NC) Author: The Daily News Staff | Section: News | 130 Words OpenURL Link

Onslow Water and Sewer Authority has deployed a six-person crew to the town of Woodfin to assist with Hurricane Helene recovery efforts.

The team's primary objective, according to a Monday morning press release, is to aid in the restoration of water and sewer services, which have been severely impacted by Helene.

The relief mission is expected to take about a week, according to ONWASA, and is being coordinated with the NC Water and Wastewater Response Network.

ONWASA received invaluable assistance from sister utilities in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence in 2018, and they're looking forward to returning the favor.

"I am incredibly proud of our dedicated employees who have stepped up to assist in the recovery efforts," said ONWASA CEO Franky Howard. "My thoughts and prayers are with those affected by the hurricane."

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Hurricane Milton strengthens as rescues continue in NC

October 7, 2024 | Daily Reflector, The (Greenville, NC) Author: Staff, wire reports | Section: Local | 622 Words OpenURL Link

Gov. Roy Cooper said more military assets have been deployed to aid search and rescue efforts in areas devastated by Hurricane Helene in western North Carolina as a new weather threat emerges in the Gulf of Mexico.

Milton strengthened into a major hurricane Monday on a path toward Florida population centers including Tampa and Orlando, threatening a storm surge as high as 12 feet in Tampa Bay and setting the stage for potential mass evacuations less than two weeks after a catastrophic Hurricane Helene swamped the coastline.

Milton grew into a Category 3 hurricane with maximum sustained winds of 125 mph over the southern Gulf of Mexico. Storm surge and hurricane watches were issued for Florida's Gulf Coast, and a hurricane warning was issued for Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula.

Forecast models vary widely, but the most likely path would have Milton making landfall Wednesday in the Tampa Bay area and remaining a hurricane as it moves across central Florida toward the Atlantic Ocean.

That would largely spare other southeastern states ravaged by Helene, which caused catastrophic damage from northern Florida to the Appalachian Mountains and killed at least 230 people, forecasters predicted.

Air search and rescue teams flew 48 additional missions on Saturday, locating 39 survivors stranded in western North Carolina, Cooper reported at 5 p.m. on Sunday. So far 6,586 people and counting have been rescued, evacuated or assisted by search and rescue teams since the storm hit, Cooper said.

"Seventy-seven storm-related deaths have been confirmed in North Carolina by the Office of Chief Medical Examiner," Cooper said. "We expect that this number will continue to rise over the coming days."

Nearly 50 search and rescue teams from across the country have deployed more than 1,600 responders to the region over the past 10 days. Local and state emergency responders now have the assistance of approximately 1,700 N.C. National Guard troops and 1,000 active-duty military personnel.

The 1,000 soldiers from Fort Liberty and Fort Campbell mobilized to assist with search and rescue and coordinate air traffic to ensure the safety of relief missions. They also are partnering with the N.C. Department of Transportation to help speed the clearing of roads, and with county emergency managers to distribute commodities including food and water, Cooper said. An additional 500 active-duty soldiers will join those already deployed.

Cooper said communications in the region are improving rapidly, with providers saying 80% of access to cell service in the region has been restored. An additional 30 Starlink satellite systems have arrived and will support search and rescue efforts underway.

Approximately 142,000 customers remained without power at 12:30 p.m. Sunday, down from a peak of more than 1 million. Overall power outage numbers will fluctuate up and down as power crews temporarily take circuits or substations offline to make repairs and restore additional customers.

Travel remains dangerous, with approximately 650 roads closed as of Sunday morning. More than 100 of those roads are primary routes connecting the region. As connectivity and reporting measures improve, these numbers may increase, Cooper reported.

More than \$30.2 million in FEMA Individual Assistance funds have been paid so far to Western NC disaster survivors

and more than 96,747 people have registered for Individual Assistance. Nearly 1,700 people are now housed in hotels through FEMA's Transitional Sheltering Assistance. Federal partners have delivered more than 6.1 million liters of water and more than 4.1 individual meals in North Carolina to support both responders and people living in the affected communities.

More than 700 FEMA staff are in the state to help with the western North Carolina relief effort. In addition to search and rescue and providing commodities, they are meeting with disaster survivors in shelters and neighborhoods to provide rapid access to relief resources. They can be identified by their FEMA logo apparel and federal government identification.

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Coordinated air relief efforts ensure safety in western NC

October 7, 2024 | Enquirer-Journal, The (Monroe, NC) Author: Bridgette Barthe N.C. Department of Transportation | Section: Enquirer Journal | 402 Words OpenURL Link

RALEIGH, N.C. — The extraordinary outpouring of support for North Carolina in the wake of Hurricane Helene has been unprecedented, with airports, pilots, airfield operations staff and community organizations stepping up across the state and country. These groups have delivered essential supplies, such as food, water, medicines and baby formula, to some of the most affected areas.

Since Hurricane Helene, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has reported a 300% increase in air traffic over western North Carolina. This surge includes private aircraft, the N.C. National Guard, and military search and rescue missions, all working to aid those in need. The increase in air traffic necessitates immediate coordination to ensure safe, efficient relief and rescue operations.

"Helene has already devastated so much; we want every pilot, aircraft and airport staff member to go home safely every night of the response," said Becca Gallas, director of NCDOT Division of Aviation. "Our military and civilian aviation partners are providing vital services to North Carolinians cut off from other access."

In collaboration with federal and state agencies, including FEMA, FAA, N.C. National Guard and the Department of Defense, the N.C. Division of Aviation has implemented several critical safety strategies:

Prior permission request lines: Pilots call ahead to schedule landing and unloading times and aircraft parking, so aircraft are spaced out and reducing congestion and risk of incidents. These lines are in place at specific airports, including Asheville Regional Airport and Rutherford County Airport. This system helps manage traffic flow, ensuring safe and efficient ground operations.

Standard-use Army aircraft flight routes (SAAFR): Designated corridors in the sky have been established to separate civilian and military aircraft, facilitating smoother operations. This first-of-its-kind strategy has proven highly effective.

Temporary flight restrictions: Search-and-rescue partners are using short, time and location specific restrictions on air operations to ensure safety when multiple helicopters are engaged in localized search and rescue efforts.

Temporary air traffic control towers: Additional air traffic control towers are being deployed to manage high-traffic regional airports, ensuring safer navigation during Helene response efforts.

Despite the overwhelming need, these coordinated measures have already reduced incidents. Early in the response, there were two short-term runway closures caused by small airdrop aircraft incidents, but no major incidents have occurred since these new systems were put in place.

While much has been done, continued collaboration across multiple agencies is required to ensure the safe operation of all aircraft involved in Helene relief efforts.

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Helene survivors struggle to get cell service - Storm's damage leads to preparedness questions

October 7, 2024 | Fayetteville Observer, The (NC) Author: Trevor Hughes and Chris Kenning; USA TODAY Section: News | 932 Words Page: A8 OpenURL Link

BURNSVILLE, N.C. – The ongoing loss of cellphone service in Hurricane Helene-impacted areas raises questions for survivors about safety, missed emergency warnings and the inability to reassure far-flung friends and family.

Helene knocked out power to wide swaths of the South with both high winds and flooding. The destruction also destroyed cellphone towers, severing communication for potentially millions of people. The lack of service is obvious across the region, as frustrated residents cluster near the few sites offering Wi-Fi or spotty cell service.

In the storm's aftermath, the town of Red Hill's 355 residents couldn't call to check on loved ones. They couldn't get news about road closures, who had gasoline or generators, and who needed help.

"No one knew if we were dead or alive," said Kacie Smith, 28, who runs the Red Hill general store.

Cellphone companies have a wide variety of emergency replacement systems they can deploy, but they require physical access to disaster areas, which is still being restored.

"There's a feeling of real disconnect, no pun intended, when cellphone service goes out," said Jonathan Sury, a senior staff associate at the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Climate School.

One major challenge: disasters are happening more frequently, and when they do, they cost more on average to recover from. That means higher costs for governments and corporations like cellphone providers AT&T, Verizon and T-Mobile.

Experts have warned for years that American infrastructure, from cellphone towers to electric service, highway bridges and drinking water systems, is vulnerable to disasters.

According to federal officials, the United States since 1980 has suffered nearly 400 weather and climate disasters costing more than \$1 billion each, totaling more than \$2.8 trillion in damages. That doesn't include Helene or July's Hurricane Beryl.

"The downside is we're having more storms," said Shannon Weiner, the Monroe County, Florida, director of emergency management. "The upside is that we're getting better at responding to them because of the partnerships."

Weiner, whose county includes the Florida Keys, has worked in emergency management for 20 years. She said Monroe County began including cellphone companies as part of annual regional planning exercises following 2017's Hurricane Irma, which knocked out phone service, severed electrical lines and destroyed roads.

Helene, which hit Florida on the night of Sept. 26 before moving inland, severed power from Florida's Big Bend up through Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina, Tennessee and into Virginia. More than 200 people were killed as a result of the storm, and that number could climb as searches continue.

Hampering the efforts to tally the deaths: A lack of cell service is making it hard for people who survived to check in. At one point, authorities said around 1,000 people were missing, but that was because many of them were simply out of communication.

Recognizing the loss of connectivity, federal officials sent 40 Starlink internet terminals to the area to assist. Small enough to fit in a backpack and easily powered by a generator or SUV's power outlet, the terminals provide high-speed Wi-Fi service via a constellation of privately owned satellites.

T.H.O.R. and other equipment

Among the solutions that providers like Verizon are deploying into the Helene disaster area are trucks like T.H.O.R., a behemoth mobile cell system officially called the Tactical Humanitarian Operations Response vehicle.

Built on a Ford truck chassis, the T.H.O.R. system has two satellite antennas, two collapsible cellphone towers and waist-high tires. It even has a drone that operators can fly into the sky to send cell signals further. Workers have also mounted a Starlink satellite terminal on a battery-assisted mountain bike to access areas where vehicles can't go.

T.H.O.R. wasn't deployed to Helene in part because the roads are so damaged, and Verizon instead sent in 70 other pieces of equipment, including tethered drones that act as extra-tall temporary cellphone towers. Verizon has a small army of workers restoring service, including more than 1,000 contractors helping clear roads, the company said.

Other mobile phone companies have similar equipment. AT&T, for instance, built a custom 45-foot-long landing craft after it had to use a barge following 2022's Hurricane Ian to float cellphone equipment out to serve Sanibel Island off Florida's coast.

And retailers like Home Depot stockpile plywood, generators and other recovery materials around the country. Home Depot earlier this summer also announced new partnerships to better assist Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands during this year's hurricane season.

What being prepared looks like

Most cellphone towers are equipped with emergency generators that can run independently for several days, and electric utilities across the country have been working to "harden" power lines against disasters.

Florida Light & Power, for instance, says it has put 76% of its main lines serving critical communities and services underground or otherwise toughened them against storms, and replaced nearly all of its major transmission support poles with steel or concrete structures.

Still, days after Helene passed, thousands of residents of Florida's Big Bend area remained without electricity.

Sury said many utilities are lagging in their preparations, because that might require charging customers more money or cut into profits. He said local governments and some states are also unwilling to adequately fund preparations in an era of cascading disasters. Helene, for instance, knocked out power but also wiped out drinkingwater systems in parts of North Carolina.

"We've not made many of the upgrades we know we need to make in this country," Sury said. "There is a fundamental lack of readiness that is present and doesn't show any real signs of changing. Being prepared costs money."

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Governor discouraging tourism in western NC

October 7, 2024 | Fayetteville Observer, The (NC) Author: Will Hofmann; Asheville Citizen Times | Section: News | 507 Words Page: A4 OpenURL Link

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – As peak leaf season approaches in the mountains of North Carolina, Gov. Roy Cooper told the Citizen Times that tourists are not wanted as the region copes with crises after the floods caused by Tropical Storm Helene.

Cooper said he wants only people who are dedicated to response efforts coming to the area.

"We don't want you here unless you are directly helping," Cooper told the Citizen Times on Thursday. "So we're continuing to ask people not to come. And that's tough for an area that was about to enter its peak season for tourism economy. But I've talked with people in the Chamber of Commerce. They understand that meeting people's immediate needs, saving lives, is first."

Cooper said the goal is to continue to expand rescue and recovery efforts, which would be hindered and strained by the additional resources and road space required to maintain tourists.

"We want to keep those roads open for utility trucks, for rescue personnel, for medical people, for supplies, for fuel – all of this transportation that is 10 times more than you would normally need ... just to bring in basic necessities for people who don't have them," Cooper said.

Various tourism entities agreed.

Visit North Carolina, the state's official marketing organization, issued a travel advisory warning to all potential tourists: Do not travel to the region as cities and towns continue to battle power and water outages.

"People have always been drawn to Asheville and the mountains of Western North Carolina. We know many people around the country care deeply and want to support our community. It's not just about what's happening now, but about planning for the months and years ahead," the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority and Explore Asheville said Thursday in a statement to the Citizen Times.

"Right now, the focus is on taking care of area residents and workers and servicing the many first responders who have answered the call from all over the country – helping those impacted and addressing the economic and emotional toll at hand," the statement continued.

VisitNC has been working to address visitor displacement throughout the region, fielding 7,300 calls about the topic, according to the advisory.

Many attractions are currently closed, including the Biltmore and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Whole districts of Asheville, like the River Arts District – a beloved tourism district near the French Broad River – remain in ruins.

"Traditionally, fall is the most vibrant time of year for us, both visually across the Blue Ridge Mountains and for our economic vitality," the county tourism authority said. "This is definitely going to hurt. Our hearts and minds are focused on supporting our community right now and starting to lay the foundation for recovery."

The organization encouraged those who want to support the region to donate to the Salvation Army of Asheville, MANNA FoodBank or United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County.

Contributing: Chris Kenning, USA TODAY

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Disaster politics - Trump, Harris are latest to deal with fallout - Responses have helped make or break careers

October 7, 2024 | Fayetteville Observer, The (NC) Author: David Jackson; USA TODAY | Section: News | 919 Words Page: A1 OpenURL Link

WASHINGTON - Another presidential election blown around by a hurricane.

In terms of politics, Vice President Kamala Harris and President Joe Biden are hoping that recovery from Hurricane Helene will resemble the federal government's response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012 – a fairly smooth process that did credit to the last Democratic-led White House in a presidential election season.

Former President Donald Trump, meanwhile, is trying to turn the latest natural disaster to strike the U.S. during an election year into the Harris-Biden version of Hurricane Andrew in 1992 – a slow and sloppy response that sealed the political fate of defeated President George H.W. Bush.

"There's nobody that's handled a hurricane or storm worse than what they're doing right now," Trump said to supporters Thursday night in Saginaw, Michigan.

Trump's indictment has included falsehoods – he claimed that federal disaster money went to migrants and that Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, a Republican, had trouble reaching Biden, but neither were the case – and the 2024 Republican nominee for the White House has been accused of playing politics with disaster relief during his presidency.

During his tour of ravaged areas of Georgia, Florida, North Carolina and South Carolina, Biden urged people to put politics aside and try to help as many storm victims as possible.

"When you do that, I hope we begin to break down this rabid partisanship that exists," Biden said during a visit to Ray City, Georgia. "I mean that sincerely. There's no rationale for it."

This election's hurricane debate is particularly fierce in Georgia and North Carolina, storm-damaged swing states that were the recipients of candidate visits last week.

In Augusta, Georgia, Harris did not mention Trump by name but told residents that "we are here for the long haul. ... The coordination that we have dedicated ourselves to will be long-lasting to get families, to get residents, to get neighborhoods back up and running."

Disaster politics nothing new

Disaster politics is a staple of presidential politics, from the flu epidemic of 1918-1920 to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. After all, fall campaigns take place in the heart of flu season, although any disaster – and the government response to it – can change the shape of American politics.

During the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927, President Calvin Coolidge appointed a prominent official to head up relief efforts: Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover.

Already famous for getting food supplies to Belgium during World War I, Hoover rode flood relief all the way to the White House.

"Presidents - as chief executives and the only leaders selected by the entire country - are expected to take actions

that will protect and help Americans," said political scientist Lara Brown, author of "Jockeying for the American Presidency: The Political Opportunism of Aspirants."

"When disasters occur," she said, "Americans look to presidents to see how closely their promises of compassion, protection and assistance match their deeds."

Andrew as cautionary tale

The cautionary tale is President George H.W. Bush. Seeking reelection in 1992, Bush already faced trouble from a slumping economy and a fierce challenge from Democrat Bill Clinton.

Then came August and Hurricane Andrew, which smashed the southern coast of Florida.

In his biography of the elder Bush, historian Timothy Naftali wrote that "it took too many days for the U.S. government to respond adequately."

Bush wound up losing the election, although the incumbent Republican did carry Florida (barely).

'A damaging period'

His son, Republican George W. Bush, took care to look on top of things when four hurricanes hit Florida in a six-week period during the 2004 hurricane season, another presidential election year.

The next year, after winning a second term, Bush suffered for a sloppy response to Hurricane Katrina, an example of what not to do.

In his memoir, Bush said his mistakes with the Katrina response added to existing burdens: "The aftermath of Katrina – combined with the collapse of Social Security reform and the drumbeat of violence in Iraq – made the fall of 2005 a damaging period in my presidency."

Cooperation after Sandy

Incumbent President Barack Obama fared better in October of 2012 when Superstorm Sandy gutted the New Jersey coast. Obama promoted cooperation with New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a prominent Republican, and the Democratic president sailed to victory over GOP nominee Mitt Romney.

When Christie ran for president in 2016, Republicans criticized him for working with Obama. Trump, then a primary opponent of Christie, mocked the New Jersey governor by saying, "he was like a little boy: 'Oh, I'm with the president.'"

Mike DuHaime, a former aide to Christie, said voters in his home state of New Jersey loved Christie for working with Obama, and overwhelmingly reelected him governor in 2014.

Republican presidential caucus and primary voters, however, "punished" Christie when he ran for president, DuHaime said, "as if somehow working with the federal government during the largest natural disaster in the history of the state was wrong."

He added: "Somewhere along the line, compromise and bipartisanship became dirty words among the far right and far left."

'A political lens'

As Trump tries to criticize Harris and Biden over Hurricane Helene, some of his own former administration officials said he played politics with disaster relief while he was in the Oval Office.

Trump hesitated to provide disaster aid to areas he believed were Democratic-leaning, including California as wildfires raged, said a report from Politico's E&E News that cited interviews with a pair of ex-Trump aides.

Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung called the story "fake news" that never happened. "None of this is true and is nothing more than a fabricated story from someone's demented imagination," Cheung told USA TODAY.

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Helene survivors struggle to get cell service - Storm's damage leads to preparedness questions

October 7, 2024 | Gaston Gazette, The (Gastonia, NC) Author: Trevor Hughes and Chris Kenning; USA TODAY Section: News | 932 Words Page: A4 OpenURL Link

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In the storm's aftermath, the town of Red Hill's 355 residents couldn't call to check on loved ones. They couldn't get news about road closures, who had gasoline or generators, and who needed help.

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One major challenge: disasters are happening more frequently, and when they do, they cost more on average to recover from. That means higher costs for governments and corporations like cellphone providers AT&T, Verizon and T-Mobile.

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Gastonia man reported missing in WNC

October 7, 2024 | Gaston Gazette, The (Gastonia, NC) Author: Kara Fohner; Gaston Gazette | Section: News | 359 Words Page: A2 OpenURL Link

A Gaston County man may have been in the Asheville area during Hurricane Helene, and his family is looking for him.

Travis Lee Conner, 47, of Gastonia may have been living in his pickup truck, a 1998 Toyota Forerunner, near Biltmore Village at the time the hurricane struck on Friday, Sept. 27, his niece, Nautilus Butler said. Biltmore Village saw severe flooding during the hurricane.

"I personally last heard from him at the beginning of September when he found out my brother was diagnosed with cancer. My mom heard from him I think last week, and he stated he was in Asheville working on something," Butler said.

Conner, who has been reported missing, works as a maintenance technician in the textile industry.

"He was one of those guys that would hop around to every single mill that he could get his hands on," Butler said.

Conner had been living in the mountains for at least a year after graduating from a drug addiction rehabilitation program.

"He was trying to get his life back together, trying to save up money going to different jobs," Butler said. "Last I knew, he was still sober. He was coherent, and he hadn't relapsed at any point."

Until the hurricane, if a family member called him, Conner would either answer the phone or contact them via Facebook Messenger, Butler said.

"Half of them are going to voicemail, and then the other half are completely disconnecting. Obviously, with the power lines down, we assume he is in one of those areas where you can't get ahold of him," Butler said.

Butler also has spent time in Lenoir.

Conner is among hundreds reported missing in Western North Carolina. Hurricane Helene left a trail of devastation in the greater Asheville area and across the southeast, and the death toll from the hurricane has risen above 200.

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Kara Fohner, Gaston Gazette, 'Gastonia man reported missing in WNC', *Gaston Gazette, The* (online), 7 Oct 2024 A2 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0ED74E1BEDAE0



Hurricane Helene - Gaston couple travels to Spruce Pine

October 7, 2024 | Gaston Gazette, The (Gastonia, NC) Author: Chloe Collins; Gaston Gazette | Section: News | 456 Words Page: A1 OpenURL Link

Just days after Hurricane Helene ravaged parts of Western North Carolina, a Gaston couple knew they had to brave the washed out roads, downed power lines and trees to get to Spruce Pine.

Melissa Greene grew up in the mountains in Spruce Pine, and although she now lives with her husband Jonah Greene in Belmont, many family members and childhood friends still live in the area.

After having very limited communication if any with loved ones, the Greenes loaded their Toyota Rav4 with gallons of chainsaw fuel and journeyed into the flood zone.

The trip took much longer than it would normally due to the number of trees down and water cutting several multilane roads down to single lanes.

Eventually, the pair made it to the city and began doing welfare checks on homes they passed and people they knew.

One of the most powerful moments for Jonah Greene, he said, was when the couple checked on an elderly woman who was on oxygen and found that she did not have another oxygen tank.

They prayed with the woman, assured her that they would try their best to find oxygen for her along their trek, and went on their way.

They had asked around and nobody knew where they might be able to find another tank.

Around 15 minutes later, the Greenes came across a neighbor who happened to have an extra tank of oxygen he could spare.

Continuing their journey, the couple went to the street Melissa Greene grew up on to check on former neighbors.

Parts of the road were inaccessible, so they worked with other community members to make and stabilize a makeshift bridge that gave several people access in and out.

The Greenes said the community in Spruce Pine was banding together in the wake of the destruction and pooling resources.

In the end, the couple was in Spruce Pine for a few days evacuating former neighbors, loved ones and strangers alike.

They even reconnected a mother and son at a local shelter, Jonah Greene said.

According to Melissa, everything is pretty overwhelming right now as far as rebuilding goes.

The National Guard is currently working in Spruce Pine to keep people fed and make sure there is water available to them, she said.

However, Greene said she believes rebuilding infrastructure like roads, bridges and power structures will take

months or years to complete.

In coming months, clean-up crews and construction workers will be needed in the area, she said.

In the meantime, Jonah Greene said, sleeping bags for those who have lost their homes, trash bags and volunteers to help get trash out of living areas left standing and shelters, and Star Link hotspots to allow people to reconnect and get information are all in high demand.

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Chloe Collins, Gaston Gazette, 'Hurricane Helene - Gaston couple travels to Spruce Pine', *Gaston Gazette, The* (online), 7 Oct 2024 A1 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0ED7504859BA8



Governor discouraging tourism in western NC

October 7, 2024 | Gaston Gazette, The (Gastonia, NC) Author: Will Hofmann; Asheville Citizen Times | Section: News | 507 Words Page: A2 OpenURL Link

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – As peak leaf season approaches in the mountains of North Carolina, Gov. Roy Cooper told the Citizen Times that tourists are not wanted as the region copes with crises after the floods caused by Tropical Storm Helene.

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"We don't want you here unless you are directly helping," Cooper told the Citizen Times on Thursday. "So we're continuing to ask people not to come. And that's tough for an area that was about to enter its peak season for tourism economy. But I've talked with people in the Chamber of Commerce. They understand that meeting people's immediate needs, saving lives, is first."

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"People have always been drawn to Asheville and the mountains of Western North Carolina. We know many people around the country care deeply and want to support our community. It's not just about what's happening now, but about planning for the months and years ahead," the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority and Explore Asheville said Thursday in a statement to the Citizen Times.

"Right now, the focus is on taking care of area residents and workers and servicing the many first responders who have answered the call from all over the country – helping those impacted and addressing the economic and emotional toll at hand," the statement continued.

VisitNC has been working to address visitor displacement throughout the region, fielding 7,300 calls about the topic, according to the advisory.

Many attractions are currently closed, including the Biltmore and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Whole districts of Asheville, like the River Arts District – a beloved tourism district near the French Broad River – remain in ruins.

"Traditionally, fall is the most vibrant time of year for us, both visually across the Blue Ridge Mountains and for our economic vitality," the county tourism authority said. "This is definitely going to hurt. Our hearts and minds are focused on supporting our community right now and starting to lay the foundation for recovery."

The organization encouraged those who want to support the region to donate to the Salvation Army of Asheville, MANNA FoodBank or United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County.

Contributing: Chris Kenning, USA TODAY

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Disaster politics an election-year staple - Responses have helped make or break careers

October 7, 2024 | Gaston Gazette, The (Gastonia, NC) Author: David Jackson; USA TODAY | Section: News | 951 Words Page: A5 OpenURL Link

WASHINGTON - Another presidential election blown around by a hurricane.

In terms of politics, Vice President Kamala Harris and President Joe Biden are hoping that recovery from Hurricane Helene will resemble the federal government's response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012 – a fairly smooth process that did credit to the last Democratic-led White House in a presidential election season.

Former President Donald Trump, meanwhile, is trying to turn the latest natural disaster to strike the U.S. during an election year into the Harris-Biden version of Hurricane Andrew in 1992 – a slow and sloppy response that sealed the political fate of defeated President George H.W. Bush.

"There's nobody that's handled a hurricane or storm worse than what they're doing right now," Trump said to supporters Thursday night in Saginaw, Michigan.

Trump's indictment has included falsehoods – he claimed that federal disaster money went to migrants and that Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, a Republican, had trouble reaching Biden, but neither were the case – and the 2024 Republican nominee for the White House has been accused of playing politics with disaster relief during his presidency.

During his tour of ravaged areas of Georgia, Florida, North Carolina and South Carolina, Biden urged people to put politics aside and try to help as many storm victims as possible.

"When you do that, I hope we begin to break down this rabid partisanship that exists," Biden said during a visit to Ray City, Georgia. "I mean that sincerely. There's no rationale for it."

This election's hurricane debate is particularly fierce in Georgia and North Carolina, storm-damaged swing states that were the recipients of candidate visits last week.

In Augusta, Georgia, Harris did not mention Trump by name but told residents that "we are here for the long haul. ... The coordination that we have dedicated ourselves to will be long-lasting to get families, to get residents, to get neighborhoods back up and running."

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Already famous for getting food supplies to Belgium during World War I, Hoover rode flood relief all the way to the White House.

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Presidency: The Political Opportunism of Aspirants."

"When disasters occur," she said, "Americans look to presidents to see how closely their promises of compassion, protection and assistance match their deeds."

Andrew as cautionary tale

The cautionary tale is President George H.W. Bush. Seeking reelection in 1992, Bush already faced trouble from a slumping economy and a fierce challenge from Democrat Bill Clinton.

Then came August and Hurricane Andrew, which smashed the southern coast of Florida.

In his biography of the elder Bush, historian Timothy Naftali wrote that "it took too many days for the U.S. government to respond adequately."

Bush wound up losing the election, although the incumbent Republican did carry Florida (barely).

'A damaging period'

His son, Republican George W. Bush, took care to look on top of things when four hurricanes hit Florida in a six-week period during the 2004 hurricane season, another presidential election year.

The next year, after winning a second term, Bush suffered for a sloppy response to Hurricane Katrina, an example of what not to do.

In his memoir, Bush said his mistakes with the Katrina response added to existing burdens: "The aftermath of Katrina – combined with the collapse of Social Security reform and the drumbeat of violence in Iraq – made the fall of 2005 a damaging period in my presidency."

Cooperation after Sandy

Incumbent President Barack Obama fared better in October of 2012 when Superstorm Sandy gutted the New Jersey coast. Obama promoted cooperation with New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a prominent Republican, and the Democratic president sailed to victory over GOP nominee Mitt Romney.

When Christie ran for president in 2016, Republicans criticized him for working with Obama. Trump, then a primary opponent of Christie, mocked the New Jersey governor by saying, "he was like a little boy: 'Oh, I'm with the president.'"

Mike DuHaime, a former aide to Christie, said voters in his home state of New Jersey loved Christie for working with Obama, and overwhelmingly reelected him governor in 2014.

Republican presidential caucus and primary voters, however, "punished" Christie when he ran for president, DuHaime said, "as if somehow working with the federal government during the largest natural disaster in the history of the state was wrong."

He added: "Somewhere along the line, compromise and bipartisanship became dirty words among the far right and far left."

'A political lens'

As Trump tries to criticize Harris and Biden over Hurricane Helene, some of his own former administration officials said he played politics with disaster relief while he was in the Oval Office.

Trump hesitated to provide disaster aid to areas he believed were Democratic-leaning, including California as wildfires raged, said a report from Politico's E&E News that cited interviews with a pair of ex-Trump aides.

Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung called the story "fake news" that never happened. "None of this is true and is nothing more than a fabricated story from someone's demented imagination," Cheung told USA TODAY.

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David Jackson, USA TODAY, 'Disaster politics an election-year staple - Responses have helped make or break careers', *Gaston Gazette, The* (online), 7 Oct 2024 A5 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0ED74CFA00BB8>



Goldsboro firefighters assist in Helene recovery

October 7, 2024 | Goldsboro News-Argus, The (NC) Author: Sam Dietrich| Section: Local | 156 Words OpenURL Link

A group of Goldsboro firefighters were deployed to western North Carolina Sunday to help with relief efforts from Hurricane Helene.

On Sunday morning, four firefighters from the Goldsboro Fire Department traveled to western North Carolina to assist those in need, said LaToya Henry, Goldsboro public information officer.

The firefighters include GPD Capt. Chris Walker, Engineer Brandon Voyles, Engineer Sammy Hardy and Senior Firefighter Rob Poll, Henry said.

The N.C. Office of the State Fire Marshal had sent a deployment assignment to the GFD Saturday to deploy firefighters in western North Carolina on Sunday.

From Sunday through Saturday, the four GFD firefighters will work with the Garren Creek Fire Department, in Fairview in Buncombe County, to perform any emergency community needs that arise, Henry said.

On Monday morning, more GFD firefighters have helped by donating essential supplies to western North Carolina.

GFP Engineer David Wilkerson will deliver the donations in a trailer connected to a Chevrolet Silverado truck, according to GFD officials.

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ANGUISH IN ASHE

October 7, 2024 | News & Record (Greensboro, NC)

Author: SUSIE C. SPEAR Staff Reporter | Section: Main | 1914 Words

Page: 1A OpenURL Link

WARRENSVILLE - Loss is all too familiar to Gloria Graybeal.

As night fell Thursday evening, she propped her shovel against the wall and rested in a portable chair inside the modest used car dealership her dad opened decades ago on N.C. 88, the main riverfront roadway in Warrensville, population 1,400.

Outside, a fleet of sedans, compact cars and trucks all bear distinct muddy water marks etched above their doors to define the flood that washed over this Ashe County burg over a week ago.

All are likely a total loss, with floorboards and upholstery caked with sludge from the unprecedented surge of the North Fork of the New River - the end result of countless inches of rain dumped by Hurricane Helene in just 72 hours. The violent storm sent water 40 feet up a grassy bank to road level, then another five feet high inside Graybeal's dealership and on across N.C. 88.

Just opposite the auto lot, across N.C. 88, stands a cross unmoved by the deluge - a marker signifying Graybeal's greatest loss. That of her precious son.

In February 2021, Ethan Seth Shrader, 21, passed away after his motorcycle crashed into the side of a frame building that sits along the curve. It's a pain Graybeal can't speak about.

In the wake of the storm, she's taking comfort from friend Tony Severt and boyfriend Chris Roland, both helping clear debris with Graybeal and cranking engines to see which cars may sputter to life.

"I'm doing the best way I know how," Graybeal admitted. "I'm just digging up mud and doing what we can to start over."

Like nearly every business owner in the area, Graybeal lacks flood insurance. She'd always felt secure being positioned so high on a hill, she said.

But this once-in-a-lifetime event caused a universal shock to the region.

"We're so deep in the hole," said Graybeal, growing emotional. She wiped her eyes. "I don't know what to do, but we're gonna try to get back."

Graybeal's stoicism is not uncommon for residents in these Blue Ridge Mountains. They come from a legacy of self-reliant people, intrepid folks who carved out their lives in the rugged hills, knowing their winters would be more harsh, their plow rows more steep and resources for their homes and farms more scarce. They established a network of neighbors to help mend fences, dig wells and tend to the sick.

And now, that very kind of support system is in full force as this area, like many other enclaves in the rural counties of North Carolina and Tennessee, makes do with help from volunteer relief groups until more state and federal aid arrives.

Lansing, an Ashe County town of 128, brimmed with activity Thursday as shop owners and residents directed volunteers with loaded trailers to the most remote reaches of the area where people were still without food and water.

Johnny Burleson delegated traffic and resources at Command Central, a portable trailer set up by the Wilkes County Rescue Squad.

"We organized our own emergency response team," said Burleson, who lives in the nearby Horse Creek community.

Earlier Thursday morning, he greeted Gov. Roy Cooper and top administrators with the state's Department of Health and Human Services when they arrived by helicopter to assess the damage.

"They spent a few hours and saw firsthand what is going on, and we felt very good about their response," Burleson said.

Problems are so vast, they are nearly unfathomable, Burleson and others explained. With fences washed away, livestock are roaming and often in roadways.

Once they're corralled, farmers will need hay to replace what has been lost. That need will be most keen in about three weeks, locals said.

Infrastructure damage is staggering. Roadways leading in and out of communities are dangerously eroded by the assault from the storm surge.

Steep curved roads in many areas have been reduced to one lane because the shoulders collapsed. The asphalt appears to have been bitten away by jaws of a monster.

Yellowjackets blanket trash scraps and have become a hazard for children and adults. For that reason, residents are pleading for donations of EpiPens and Benadryl for those who suffer anaphylactic shock from bee stings and lesser reactions.

Bridge after bridge is destroyed and laden with felled trees and other debris. In fact, some volunteers have used drones to drop food to people who cannot be reached by plane or ATVs.

Cornfields are laid flat and burned blonde, as if folded down like sheets of paper by wind and water.

Automobiles float in the North Fork of the New River.

Every mile or so, you see the foundation of a riverside house - then glimpse the splintered remains snagged in trees downstream.

Clothing, tin roof panels, toys and bikes hang in chalky vines by the river.

The front yards and carports of houses are heaped with mildew and the soggy contents of once-cozy homes.

And in some yards, salvaged homemade quilts are stretched to dry in the welcome sun - flags of optimism.

So far, one woman has been confirmed dead in the Rich Hill area, according to Lansing Fire Chief Jeff Venable. The unnamed woman was trying to escape a flooded Jeep with the aid of her husband, but perished in the rushing river.

Watching his house wash away was more than one man in neighboring Grayson County, Va., could bear, according to Venable. He knew the tradesman personally.

"He said he was too old to start over and went to his truck and shot himself," said Venable with a sober nod.

Like many, Venable has a timeline events from Helene seared into his mind's eye.

"We lost two of our firetrucks," he recalled. "And Christy Matkins, who was trying to help us with dispatch the day of the flood, got caught in the building when the water started rising. The water rose all the way to her neck and stopped. She was lucky."

People in a nearby Lansing building, caught off-guard by the swift rise of water, were forced to "punch through" ceiling tiles to get to rooftops, Burleson said.

Other casualties may still be discovered in the northern-most part of the county, Burleson said, though no official numbers of missing persons was available.

A military crew was conducting a foot search in remote areas throughout the day on Thursday.

Rene Shuford lost everything in floodwaters, including a treasured box car from the historic "Virginia Creeper" train that once ran from Abingdon, Va., to Elkland. The train car had long rested on the lawn of her Tuckerdale community home.

"We don't know if it's livable," she said of her still-standing 114-year-old historic frame house on Big Horse Creek near Lansing. Houses that flanked it were lifted from their foundations by the flood water, Shuford said.

"I was at my house until 9 a.m. on Friday (Sept. 27). Then I took my dogs up the road and stayed at my neighbors, and the water came way up the road," she said. "The next morning, the house that had been to the right of mine, was moved to the left of my house."

She lamented the fact that two businesses located in a building she owns in downtown Lansing also lost everything when water rose 8 feet in their antique and barber shops.

Like most, Shuford's building lacked flood insurance. "It's so expensive, you can't afford to get it," she said.

For now, working among other people helps her move forward, said Shuford, a Boone native.

"Whatcha gonna do? We're obviously gonna be super busy."

At Riverview Community Center near Creston, a hamlet of 855 folks, a troupe of helpers from across the state trudged through the mire to get foodstuffs, cleaning supplies and other essentials to a staging room.

Greg Aldridge and his wife, Annette Aldridge, drove in Thursday morning from Monroe to help. "It's my birthday," she said, toting bananas and Gatorades to workers and state troopers directing traffic. "But I'm right where I want to be."

Around 2 p.m., the rhythmic roar of helicopter blades drew the attention of dozens at the community center. An Army National Guard chopper full of much-needed supplies had arrived in a nearby field.

Juanita Bledsoe of Three Top Road ran toward a crew member, who ducked out in helmet and fatigues. Bledsoe threw her arms upward and said, "My Jesus sent this!" She hugged the guardsman tight.

Courtney Eldreth, a medical assistant from Creston, was feeling lucky Thursday as she packed her side-by-side with supplies for neighbors who lost homes. She lost only power, the 27-year-old said.

"Three or four more feet and we would have lost everything. We are so fortunate. It's been such a shock," said Eldreth, who watched the "creek become a river" in her yard and from her front window counted 32 tires float by last Saturday.

"I don't know if people even have words for it yet. We knew it was gonna be bad, but this is complete devastating shock."

E.H. Farmer remembers building the ranch-style brick house for his family in 1968. His wife was expecting and life for the couple was just starting out.

On Thursday at dusk, Farmer and his son, Eric, who inherited the house, cleaned debris from the yard and assessed the gutted structure.

A sheet of bricks along the front had buckled and an aluminum carport lay twisted on the front lawn.

"I was born in 1969, and I was in the house as a baby," the younger Farmer said. "They kept me in that house in a dresser drawer as a baby."

On that treacherous Friday, he and his wife left their house around 11 a.m. as water rose inside. They were able to rescue two of their three dogs - Lexi and Haichi, but lost beloved hound Simone.

"I don't know if the county will let us build back, but we want to," said Farmer, an industrial engineer. "The river is so beautiful 95% of the time. It's just that 5% of the time that it's a mess."

Tears welled in his eyes. "You just have to have faith that the good Lord saved me because he had another purpose for me."

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Main

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Inside the mountain town that Helene nearly wiped off the map. News, A3

Column: When the unthinkable finally happens for Vanderbilt. Sports, B1

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