

#### County Commissioners hear Valle Crucis School update, approve change order request

October 21, 2024 | Watauga Democrat, The (Boone, NC) Author: Nick Fogleman nick.fogleman@wataugademocrat.com| Section: Local | 602 Words OpenURL Link

BOONE — The Watauga County Board of Commissioners approved a change order request for the continued construction administration services for the new Valle Crucis School.

Due to delays, construction is estimated to continue beyond February, which is past the current contractual completion date of Dec. 22.

"We're still within the project budget, so there's no additional funds needed to compensate for this," Watauga County Manager Deron Geouque said at the Oct. 15 meeting.

The principal contractor requested the board approve \$26,111 per month for service provided for the remainder of the contract and \$26,111 for each additional month beyond the contracted completion date.

The increases will not require additional county funding and will be covered in the existing budget due to remaining deductive balances and unused contract allowances.

The construction process has been delayed due to Hurricane Helene, previous weather events and material delivery schedules.

The original completion date before the weather extension was August 2024.

"The extensions they've gotten until Dec. 22 have all been weather-related," principal contractor Chad Roberson said. "It's not just rain days, but also mud days associated with rain days."

The construction site fared well through Hurricane Helene with minimal damage. According to Roberson, the building has a roof, and most of the siding is complete or has a vapor barrier, which protects the site from storm damage.

"Somebody did a great job in due diligence on that project and engineering to make sure that it was in a good spot," Commissioner Ray Russell said.

Commissioner Todd Castle asked who would be responsible for the costs associated with construction that will have to occur after the contractual completion date and if the builders would be responsible for failing to meet their contract obligations.

"Anything that's not completed past this date of the 22nd of this year, that 26,000 per month, would that not fall upon the contractor for not completing the job," Castle asked. "Would they not owe us?"

"They could potentially, yes," Geouque said. "We will be looking at our options once we sit down and say what is the impact on the schedule."

Roberson has requested an updated schedule from site contractors reflecting Helene's delays.

"It was an ambitious end date to me anyway. I think with perfect weather, we could have done it, but we don't have perfect weather," Castle said.

Roberson does not expect any major unforeseen expenses as the project continues.

"We look forward to having our kids in that facility, but we would like them to have a correct facility," Chair Larry Turnbow said.

The board unanimously approved the additional funding and the requested \$34,860 for the bidding and procurement of school furniture and equipment.

At the Oct. 14 Watauga County Board of Education meeting, Watauga County Schools Superintendent Leslie Alexander described the school's current state in more detail.

She said the storefront and curtain walls are complete and that all areas are enclosed.

"They're waiting to hang the doors, though, because they're super expensive, and they don't want to get damaged," Alexander said. "So the fact that they're not up is intentional.

Alexander said wood siding and naturally adhered stones should be finished in November. Temporary permanent power, which had slowed down due to the hurricane, is ready to be connected.

A paving company they were using is now off-project, and she said hopefully, the new company that came in "won't be called to do infrastructure work, but again, the hurricane has impacted that a bit."

"One thing that has been a bit of a slow up is the state wanted a civil engineer to revise the septic system design," Alexander said. "So there's been some back and forth around what that final design will be."

Moss Brennan contributed reporting to this story.

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#### The Schaefer Center Presents Series transitions Black Violin: BV20 concert to free event

October 21, 2024 | Watauga Democrat, The (Boone, NC) Author: Staff Report news@wataugademocrat.com| Section: Community | 732 Words OpenURL Link

BOONE — The Schaefer Center Presents performing arts series, presented by Appalachian State University's Office of Arts Engagement and Cultural Resources, has announced that Black Violin — BV20: Then & Now will transition from a paid event to a free concert.

After postponing the series' first two October events due to the devastation inflicted upon Watauga County and much of Western North Carolina by Hurricane Helene, SCP has pivoted the concert to a free event, understanding that music has the ability to heal and could be one pathway toward restoring the spirit of a collective community.

The concert by the acclaimed classical-meets-hip-hop duo will take place as originally scheduled on Friday, Nov. 8 at 7:30 p.m. at the Schaefer Center for the Performance Arts at App State and will be open to everyone. Reservations are required (four-ticket maximum per transaction) and seating is general admission. Tickets available at TheSchaeferCenter.org, in person at the Schaefer Center box office (733 Rivers Street), or by calling (828) 262-4046.

"As we come together as a community to heal following the devastation to so much of Western NC, we recognize the arts' ability to speak directly to the soul," said Elizabeth Auer, Executive Director of Arts Engagement and Cultural Resources. "Black Violin is a musical duo that has spent 20 years bringing people together to uplift and inspire many generations through the power of music. I am grateful for this opportunity to give back to Boone and the High Country as we navigate a new way of moving forward and celebrate our hope and resilience through live performance."

BV20: Then & Now will showcase the incredible 20-year journey of Black Violin so far, featuring Kev Marcus on violin and Wil Baptiste on viola/vocals, joined by Nat Stokes on drums, DJ SPS on turntables, and Liston Gregory on keys. This talented ensemble will deliver a performance that transcends genres, combining the elegance of classical strings with the dynamic beats of hip-hop.

"Fans can expect us to illustrate our journey from high school to headliner, and we plan to celebrate all of it: Then and Now. We want our fans to feel energized, inspired, and more driven to chase their dreams." Kev Marcus said. "I am very excited about the 20th anniversary of Black Violin. In some ways, it feels like it flew by, but we took the stairs and did it our way, and for that, I am extremely proud."

"This BV20: Then & Now tour is going to be incredible! New music and also revitalized classics," Wil Baptiste said. "Our fans are going to experience the 20 years of growth of Black Violin."

If you have already purchased tickets to Black Violin...

Previous physical and digital tickets will be converted to general admission. The Schaefer Center will issue a credit to your ticketing account for the value of the tickets you purchased. This credit can be used towards any future Schaefer Center Presents or An Appalachian Summer Festival performance. If you selected digital delivery, you will receive a confirmation email within the next few days confirming your new tickets. If you have physical tickets, your new tickets will be placed in Will Call or mailed if Schaefer Center believe they can be delivered to your address prior to the performance.

App State Disaster Relief

Mountaineers are hurting from the impacts of Hurricane Helene, with students, faculty and staff experiencing

significant hardships. Please visit AppState.edu to find relief resources and how to support our Mountaineer community.

Coming Next

PRESERVATION HALL JAZZ BAND: CREOLE CHRISTMAS

Thursday, Dec. 12 at 7:30 p.m. at the Schaefer Center for the Performing Arts

\$45 Tier 1, \$35 Tier 2, \$25 Tier 3, \$15 All Students

Celebrate the season as the Preservation Hall Jazz Band returns with the Creole Christmas concert series, which features New Orleans classics as well as some of the band's best-loved holiday selections with a twist. At a moment when musical streams are crossing with unprecedented frequency, it's crucial to remember that throughout its history, New Orleans has been the point at which sounds and cultures from around the world converge, mingle, and resurface, transformed by the Crescent City's inimitable spirit and joie de vivre. Nowhere is that idea more vividly embodied than in the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, which has held the torch of New Orleans music aloft for more than 60 years, all the while carrying it enthusiastically forward as a reminder that the history they were founded to preserve is a vibrantly living history.

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#### Hardin Park bests Parkway for county volleyball tournament title

October 21, 2024 | Watauga Democrat, The (Boone, NC) Author: Zach Colburn | Section: Sports | 587 Words OpenURL Link

BOONE — The future of Watauga High School volleyball was on display Saturday during the Watauga County Middle School tournament.

For the third year in a row, the county tournament championship, which was held inside Lentz-Eggers Gym, came down to the same two schools — Parkway and Hardin Park.

But unlike the previous two years, the Lady Golden Eagles defeated top-seeded Parkway in a three-set affair to capture the tournament title.

Originally scheduled to be a two-day event at the beginning of October, the tournament was postponed due to Hurricane Helene and condensed into one day.

Another change came in the field: The eight-county elementary schools, which go kindergarten through eighth grade, were also cut to seven after Bethel, which would've been the No. 7 seed, dropped out due to not having enough players.

In the tournament, the two highest-seeded programs split the first two sets, meaning that a third set tiebreaker, first to 15 points, was needed to determine a champion.

Hardin Park, which forced the third set after a 25-18 win in set two, appeared to have carried that momentum into the third set as the team scored 10 of the first 14 points and led 10-4 after an ace from Adeline Tate.

The Lady Patriots got as close as 13-9, but the Lady Golden Eagles ended the match with the final two points.

Parkway (11-2) looked all the part of the top seed in the opening set as it recorded the first seven points and 17 of the first 24 to build the lead to as many as 11.

Points from Ember Honeycutt and Andin Wilcox extended the lead to 21-11 before it cruised to a 25-12 win.

In the second set, Hardin Park (12-2) overcame an early deficit but rebounded and built its lead to as many as nine at 15-6 and led 24-18 after a point from Macy Woolard and a Lia Gillin ace.

The two regular season matchups, which the two teams split, also went to three sets, as did the previous two tournament championship matches between them.

Semifinals

Before the finals, Parkway and Hardin Park received tests in the semifinals.

Due to the odd amount of teams, the top-seeded Lady Patriots didn't start play until the semifinals, where it defeated Cove Creek by scores of 25-5 and 25-21.

Parkway had little trouble in the opening set as it scored 10 straight points to close it out. The fourth-seeded Lady Raiders (6-6) gave the regular-season champions all it could handle in the second set.

Cove Creek led by as many as three on multiple occasions in the second set, but the Lady Patriots kept rallying and

scored six of the final eight points to win the set, highlighted by kills from Ember Honeycutt and Addin Hodges.

In the other semifinal, the Lady Golden Eagles claimed a two-set sweep against No. 3 Green Valley (9-3) by the exact same score in each set -25-10.

Hardin Park led by as many as nine early on, 15-6, after a kill from Adeline Tate, but a kill from Aubree Elliot helped the Lady Eagles close the deficit to six (15-9).

Hardin Park would run off 10 of the final 11 points to close out the set.

#### Quarterfinals

In the day's earlier action, No. 2 Hardin Park claimed what would be its first of three wins on Saturday with a 2-0 win (25-5, 25-6) over No. 7 Valle Crucis.

Green Valley swept No. 6 Mabel by scores of 25-10 and 25-20 to advance, while Cove Creek punched its ticket with a hard-fought and close-scoring sweep of No. 5 Blowing Rock by scores of 25-21 and 25-22.

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#### More than 8,600 voters have cast their ballot so far in Watauga County

October 21, 2024 | Watauga Democrat, The (Boone, NC) Author: Moss Brennan moss.brennan@wataugademocrat.com| Section: Local | 448 Words OpenURL Link

WATAUGA — More than 8,600 people have cast their ballot so far in Watauga County.

According to Watauga County Director of Elections Matt Snyder, 8,630 people voted have voted as of the end of day Oct. 21. In Watauga County, 45,096 people are registered to vote, according to the North Carolina Board of Elections.

"We were very pleased that our Day 1 early voting numbers. (They) were very comparable to Day 1 in 2020, even with a few hours less of operation," Snyder said.

Early voting started on Oct. 17.

The App State location has had the most votes, 2,905, while the Meat Camp location has had the fewest, 548.

The other sites saw the following number of voters in the first hour:

Watauga County Administration Building: 2,157Blowing Rock: 1,087Deep Gap: 1,067Western Watauga Community Center: 866

In 2020, the last presidential election, 32,346 Watauga County voters cast their ballot — a 71.62% turnout.

Early voting times are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays and Saturdays and 1 to 5 p.m. on Sundays between Oct. 17 and Nov. 2. The last day of early voting, Nov. 2, will be from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. The Watauga County Board of Elections approved the new early voting hours on Oct. 10.

Early voting polling sites are located at:

Watauga County Administration Building (Commissioners' Board Room 814 W. King Street, Boone)Blowing Rock American Legion Building (333 Wallingford Street, Blowing Rock)Deep Gap Fire Department (6583 Old 421 S, Deep Gap)Meat Camp Fire Department (4797 NC Hwy 194 N, Boone)Plemmons Student Union Blue Ridge Ballroom (263 Locust Street, Boone with parking available at 644 Howard Street)Western Watauga Community Center (1081 Old US Hwy 421, Sugar Grove)

If you are registered to vote in Watauga County, you may vote at any early voting site you choose. Same Day Registration is available at every early voting site, but voters must provide proof of residence in Watauga County.

A photo ID is required to vote. Voters who may have lost their ID due to Hurricane Helene have the following options:

Fill out a Photo ID Exception Form at your voting site or send the form back with your absentee ballot. (A blank Exception Form will arrive with your absentee packet.) Check the box for "Exception 3: Victim of a Natural Disaster." Make sure to sign the form.Go to your county board of elections office. If you are a registered voter, they can take your photo and print an acceptable ID on the spot. For details, go to Get a Free Voter Photo ID.Get a free ID from an NCDMV office in your area. For details, see State IDs | NCDMV.

For details about North Carolina's photo ID requirement, including a list of all acceptable IDs, go to BringltNC.gov.

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#### Boone, Blowing Rock encouraging visitors to plan ahead, tread lightly

October 21, 2024 | Watauga Democrat, The (Boone, NC) Author: Moss Brennan moss.brennan@wataugademocrat.com| Section: Main Street| 527 Words OpenURL Link

WATAUGA — Boone and Blowing Rock are encouraging visitors to plan ahead and "tread lightly" when travelling to the High Country.

"Thanks to the tireless work of utility and construction crews, Boone and Blowing Rock have largely recovered from the storm's impacts," Boone Area Chamber of Commerce President/CEO wrote in a blog post. "While the circumstances we've sustained over these last weeks have left many areas of our community looking and functioning differently than you last experienced, know that our local businesses are eager to provide a heartfelt welcome to those that have provided such kindness and support."

The Boone Chamber posted specific guidelines for visitors to consider when planning a trip to the area.

Tread lightly and stay away from the areas still deeply involved in recovery and restoration activities, particularly on the northern and western ends of Watauga County. Some of these areas still have a great deal of road work, power restoration, and debris removal ongoing, and unnecessary traffic will delay these efforts. The Blue Ridge Parkway sustained considerable damage and remains closed in North Carolina indefinitely. Understand that many hotels and lodging spaces are housing displaced families, aid workers, and construction crews. Note that a curfew remains in place from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. throughout Watauga County. Consider ride share and public transit opportunities to lessen the impact on traffic. Be empathetic toward those you encounter in the community. Many residents are still dealing with major disruptions as the area tries to restart the economy and maintain the local workforce.

"In many ways, this is the same community you saw in mid-September, but in some ways, we are not at our best and won't be for some time. Know that you have been an important part of our recovery," Jackson wrote in the post. "The resilience of our community and the outpouring of support from off the mountain has gotten us to this point. Time will not allow us to thank you enough. We only ask that as you begin to return to our area, you follow the guidelines that we are suggesting to ensure we can take careful and mindful steps forward in the days and weeks ahead."

The Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce requests that visitors shop and dine locally "as much as they can" as this has a significant impact on the families who own small businesses.

They also created a "emergency fall leaf lookers route" for those who visit the High country to enjoy the fall colors the High Country is known for.

"Visitors are vital to helping our small businesses recover and your support means everything to us. If you are still waiting to visit in person, consider purchasing gift cards from our local businesses as a meaningful way to show your support at this time. If you are looking for additional ways to help, we hope you will contribute to one of the many organizations working to help those hit hardest by Hurricane Helene," the chamber posted. "Our community's resilience is unmatched. The spirit of the NC High Country is strong, and we stand together in support of those affected by this storm."

For more information on visiting the Boone and Blowing Rock areas, visit www.boonechamber.com/ and www.blowingrockncchamber.com/.

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#### Dogtoberfest annual fundraiser taking place Oct. 25

October 21, 2024 | Watauga Democrat, The (Boone, NC) Author: Moss Brennan moss.brennan@wataugademocrat.com| Section: Community | 155 Words OpenURL Link

BOONE — The annual Dogtoberfest fundraiser will take place Oct. 25 at Appalachian Mountain Brewery from 4 to 0 p.m.

All proceeds from the event will go toward Partners Canines' work to save dogs displaced by Hurricane Helene.

The fundraiser will feature a dog and owner Halloween costume contest, tracks for treats for dogs, and a Halloween backdrop for dogs and their owners to take fun pictures in front of.

Starting in 2007, Partners Canines operates mostly out of Watauga and Wilkes counties but also works across the East Coast. They transport abandoned K9s to no-kill shelters in larger metropolitan areas, such as Pennsylvania. The nonprofit is located in Todd. In 2023, the organization saved 398 animals.

"The regional shelters are flooded with dogs coming in from the storm, so we're helping by moving adoptable dogs elsewhere to make room for storm strays," said Melissa Bahleda, founder of Partners Canines.

To find out more about the nonprofit, visit tinyurl.com/yvnp7s9z.

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# Josh Tippel almost died in Helene - Josh Tippel survived a flash flood caused by Hurricane Helene. He's lucky to be alive

October 21, 2024 | Winston-Salem Journal (NC) Author: SCOTT SEXTON STAFF REPORTER | Section: A | 822 Words Page: 1 OpenURL Link

BOONE - Josh Tippel is lucky to be alive. He knows it, his friends know it and his family does, too.

The day Hurricane Helene dumped more than a foot of rain on already sodden mountain communities, Tippel was trying to get home from work and beat the worst of it.

He couldn't.

Instead, he found himself trapped by an angry flash flood. Rocks and debris pummeled his car. The narrow road on which he was stuck began to crumble, pieces tumbling down the mountainside.

He was, by his own estimation, maybe 2 feet from being washed away. Tippel and frantic onlookers called 911 repeatedly but water-rescue squads had been overwhelmed.

As he waited, Tippel climbed on top of his car and began texting goodbyes to his loved ones.

"I should have died that day, but something or someone beyond my scope of understanding prevented that from happening," he wrote in a recent social media post.

A long wait for help

More than two weeks have passed and mountain towns are still struggling.

More than 100 died in Western North Carolina and 92 others are officially considered missing in what is by far the worst natural disaster in state history.

Rescue operations have wound down, and attention has turned to opening roads, getting those displaced somewhere warm and distributing basic supplies.

Tippel knows that, too.

He and many, many others need all the help they can get - and they will for the foreseeable future.

Because of that, Tippel has started sharing his story. He doesn't want those of us who've only read snippets about what happened to forget.

"Honestly ... I didn't even realize the extent of his ordeal until I read his account," said Kristi Vestal Maier, who coowns with her husband, Mark, a company called Enviroguard in Banner Elk where Tippel works.

Early Friday, Helene didn't look like anything particularly unusual. "It had rained a lot in the days before, but that morning it felt like a regular storm," Maier said.

As the day went on, however, the rain kept falling. The Maiers texted their six employees and told them to sit tight while they checked the roads.

Tippel had already left home.

The road along a mountain ridge started to flood - with him on it - and he decided that if he couldn't turn around, he at least needed to stop. The farther downhill he went, the higher and faster the water would be.

He was trapped by a river that hadn't been there minutes before.

"One more large rock, one more chunk of asphalt, one more strong gust of wind could have sealed my fate," Tippel wrote in a social media post.

The water continued to rise, and he moved to the top of his car. He knew he couldn't walk or swim through the torrent, so he waited for a swift-water rescue team.

The two longest hours of his life passed before Watauga County firefighters could reach the spot.

"It took another hour to figure out a plan of how to get a harness to me so I could be pulled across the river," he wrote. "When I finally reached safety unharmed and the adrenaline began to wear off, I started to fully grasp the miracle I had just experienced."

He was far from alone.

Standing together

In the weeks since Helene, some towns have rebounded faster than others.

Boone is doing OK all things considered, but small communities such as Banner Elk face months of rebuilding as critical infrastructure that supplied clean water was decimated by mud and debris.

So folks like the Maiers stepped in to do what they could. They turned their warehouse - Enviroguard manufactures and supplies restoration and cleaning chemicals to disaster restoration and construction companies - into an overflow storage center for Samaritan's Purse and local chambers of commerce.

"The community and beyond has given tremendously," Maier said. "Our warehouse is packed and (is) waiting to be distributed to those that need it."

And that's why telling (and re-telling) stories like Tippel's matters. People will read and remember it for its drama and joyous outcome.

Tippel's car is a total loss, obviously. Insurance, he said, won't cover enough to pay off the loan "so I'm upside down while I try to find a replacement vehicle."

He'd accept help if offered - Who wouldn't? - but his thoughts go beyond his predicament to others in the community who suffered just as much or more.

His online outreach concludes with thanks for what's been done so far and a larger plea to remember decimated communities. It's a long road back.

"I recognize that there are so many impacted by Helene beyond myself," Tippel wrote, "so also please consider supporting the efforts of organizations and local nonprofits providing disaster relief ... .

"No one expected this to hit us like it did, but we're all resilient and building our way back up one step at a time."

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# Floridians dig out from mountains of sand - Florida digs out of mountains of sand swept in by hurricanes Helene and Milton

October 21, 2024 | Winston-Salem Journal (NC) Author: KATE PAYNE Associated Press | Section: A | 982 Words Page: 6 OpenURL Link

BRADENTON BEACH, Fla. - When a hurricane sets its sights on Florida, storm-weary residents may think of catastrophic wind, hammering rain and dangerous storm surge. Mounds of sand swallowing their homes? Not so much.

That's the reality for some after Hurricanes Helene and Milton clobbered Florida's Gulf Coast with back-to-back hits in less than two weeks. Storm surge as high as 10 feet swept mountains of sand into communities - in some areas, 5 feet tall or higher.

The fine, white sand helps make Florida's beaches among the best in the world. But the powerful storms have turned the precious commodity into a costly nuisance, with sand creating literal barriers to recovery as homeowners and municipalities dig their way out.

"I've never seen sand like this," said Scott Bennett, a contractor who has worked in storm recovery since 2005's Hurricane Katrina. "Wind, rain, water, but never sand."

The morning after Hurricane Milton crashed ashore, the roads of Bradenton Beach, about an hour's drive south of Tampa, were lined with sandbanks a couple of feet high, surrounding some bungalows. The views of the Old Florida beach town were not unlike those after a blustery Midwestern blizzard.

"The best way to describe it, it's like getting 4 to 6 feet of snow up north," said Jeremi Roberts, a member of the State Emergency Response Team surveying the damage that day.

Another hour south, Ron and Jean Dyer said the storms blew about 3 feet of sand up against their condo building on Venice Island.

"The beach just moved over everything," Ron Dyer said.

It had taken dozens of volunteers armed with shovels and wheelbarrows two days to dig all the sand out of the condo's pool after Hurricane Helene, only to see Milton fill it back in, he said.

"They just kept digging and wheeling and digging and wheeling. ... They were there for two days doing that," he said. "We got to do it all over again."

Storm recovery contractor Larry West estimates that his team will do about \$300,000 worth of work just to clean up all the sand and debris left behind at one of the condo buildings he's restoring in Manasota Key, about 35 miles south of Sarasota. He expects many property owners, especially those who don't have flood insurance, will have to pay out of pocket for this kind of cleanup.

"The poor homeowner who's going to have to spend \$150,000 cleaning up, that's going to hurt them hard," West said.

West said he is not sure where to take the sand after he heard that a local park that Charlotte County officials designated as a drop-off site was filling up with the stuff.

According to the county, two sites remain open for dropping off sand.

"Right now I'm building mountains in their parking area," West said of the condo complex he's restoring. "We're just kind of waiting to find out if they're gonna have us transport it to a different location."

Officials in hard-hit Pinellas County, home to St. Petersburg, are still crunching the numbers on just how big of a bite Helene and Milton took out of the coastline there, but county Public Works director Kelli Hammer Levy puts the current estimate at 1 million cubic yards of sand lost.

"A lot of volume has been lost, and that's our main concern here, right now," she told the county's Tourism Development Council. "It's hard to kind of stay positive with some of this stuff. I know the pictures are not what we want to see."

For perspective, a 2018 beach renourishment project to shore up the county's coastline with 1.3 million cubic yards of sand cost more than \$50 million, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Levy is hopeful that much of the displaced sand can be repurposed. Pinellas officials are encouraging residents to cart their sand right back out onto the beach - as long as it's clean.

"Again, we just need to remove debris. I've seen some piles out there with kitchen cabinets in it," Levy said. "We're going to have a problem if we have a lot of that stuff out there."

The county has also opened a drop-off location where residents can leave sand for workers to screen and clean, or dispose of if it's contaminated, under guidance from the state's Department of Environmental Protection.

In the meantime, Florida residents are continuing to dig out of the storm-driven sand, many of them by hand.

"Every shovelful is heavy," said West, the construction contractor. "This is horrendous, as far as the cleanup." © Copyright 2024, Winston-Salem Journal, Winston-Salem, NC

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KATE PAYNE; Associated Press, 'Floridians dig out from mountains of sand Florida digs out of mountains of sand swept in by hurricanes Helene and Milton', *Winston-Salem Journal* (online), 21 Oct 2024 6 <a href="https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C588A0B5FD78E0">https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C588A0B5FD78E0</a>



# Helene survivors organize to meet toilet need - After hurricane, with no running water, residents organize to meet a basic need

October 21, 2024 | Winston-Salem Journal (NC) Author: BRITTANY PETERSON Associated Press | Section: A | 871 Words Page: 6 OpenURL Link

ASHEVILLE, N.C. - It takes water to flush a toilet and tens of thousands of North Carolinians have been without it since Hurricane Helene ripped through the state three weeks ago. When Lark Frazier went around asking her Asheville neighbors how they were doing as far as water to flush, several burst into tears over the stress of where to go to the bathroom and what to do with the waste.

Some told her they were eating less to avoid going. Others said they were dumping poop in the yard and covering it with leaves. An elderly woman mentioned planning to scoop it out of the toilet with her hands.

"Not only is that horrifying and inhumane, but it's dangerous for her to be handling her waste like that," Frazier said.

Since Helene swallowed mountain towns, damaged water infrastructure and killed nearly 250 people across the Southeast, local governments have been overwhelmed, and that's spurred community organizing and innovation.

Frazier is one of the newly-minted leaders to have stepped up. She grew up in rural Colorado, using an outhouse for years before her family got a flush toilet. She drew on that experience, then came across the Emergency Toilet Guidebook online, published by the Regional Disaster Preparedness Organization in Oregon. She began fashioning rudimentary toilets and training others to do it, too.

The concept is simple: line a sturdy bucket with a thick plastic bag, cover the top with a toilet seat or a water-resistant foam noodle for comfort, then drop in a handful of wood chips or other dry material after every use to absorb liquid and reduce odor. Pee should stay separate.

"Not having waste treated appropriately can absolutely lead to a major public health crisis," said Sue Mohnkern, who developed the guidebook. Mishandling fecal matter can lead to cholera, dysentery and other serious, even fatal diseases.

Mohnkern recommends everybody living in a disaster-prone area have an emergency toilet handy.

Neither the city of Asheville nor Buncombe County have released official guidelines on how to manage human waste without water to flush.

Frazier called that lack of guidance "astounding."

County spokesperson Lillian Govus said no county could give sufficient attention to every important issue in a disaster of this scale. City Councilwoman Kim Roney has released a video explaining how to use an emergency toilet.

The city set up the first water refill sites about a week after Helene, when about 136,000 people across the Southeast had nonoperational water providers, according to the EPA. About 100,000 were in the Asheville area, although the city says that number has been reduced significantly in the past week.

Still, thousands lack water, and it's unclear when it'll be back on. Those who can't get to the refill sites are getting missed, and here again, volunteers fill the gap.

Molly Black and Elle DeBruhl, strangers before the storm, now coordinate an army of neighbors from dawn to dusk to get flush water to people. From Florida to Ohio to Texas, people have donated cube-shaped, 250-gallon, white plastic containers known as IBC totes that are often used on farms, in the chemical industry and disasters. A single tote can nearly fill a 6-foot pickup bed. Black and DeBruhl have organized people to haul the totes to ponds, fill them using pumps, then take them to where they're needed, such as apartment buildings. Other neighbors and volunteers pick up the work from there, taking buckets of water to residents in need.

"I don't even feel like I'm living my real life," said DeBruhl, whose employer, global accounting firm EY, gave her paid leave to serve her community following the storm. "I went from a six-man tote operation to now I'm in charge of solving the non-potable flushing water for the impacted area? Its crazy."

With the return of cell service returned, residents can text Black and DeBruhl's grassroots group, Flush AVL - AVL is the shorthand for Asheville - to request a refill when their tote is empty. The group replenishes about 400 sites every other day. The city is helping with some of those, but this stopgap effort to preserve dignity and public health is mainly individuals donating their time and money.

Govus applauded the volunteer efforts.

"It helps fill the gaps and meet peoples needs as we're working on systems and major processes to get people food, shelter and water," she said.

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