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Helene washes away Asheville's River Arts District

BY MARTHA QUILLIN mquillin@newsobserver.com

ASHEVILLE Asheville's River Arts District, where painters, sculptors, potters and others found outlets for their creative wares, took a direct hit as the French Broad River raged through the west side of the city during flooding from Hur-

ricane Helene. When barricades blocking access to Riverside Drive were removed on Tuesday, local residents ventured into the area

where Interstate 240 and a railroad trestle cross the river. Last week, an array of businesses lined the river on the south side of the trestle: White Duck Taco Shop; a music venue called The Salvage Station; an auto parts dealer, a crematorium and a river outfitter.

Upstream, on the other side of the bridge, were galleries and shops.

But when the river came out of its banks, water at least 10 feet deep swept through the buildings, pushing their contents so hard in the current that

exterior walls were broken or bulged outward.

It was an eerie scene near sunset. Parking lots were mud plateaus, and power poles, street signs and the remains of small trees were snagged with bits of plastic and ragged fabric that fluttered in the breeze, making the place look like it was occupied by ghosts and bones.

It was nearly incomprehensible to Sonia Pitts of Weaverville, who works for the nonprofit Open Heart Arts Center in Ashe-

Looking at the devas-



KHADEJEH NIKOUYEH Knikouyeh@charlotteobserver.com

A sign for the River Arts District sits in the rubble on Riverside Drive in Asheville on Oct. 1.

tation along Riverside Drive, Pitts was near tears.

"I don't even know how to describe how I feel," she said. "I feel hopeless and helpless, like I need to be doing more to help other people."

Pitts said her family came through the storm safely, though there were tense hours when she couldn't reach her grown children or get word on

more distant relatives. When she was able to

travel down Riverside Drive, Pitts got out of her car and pulled on her mud boots to walk around, using her phone to photograph the graffiti on the concrete railroad trestle supports. The bright colors of the art stood out against Martha Quillin: the tall piles of tangled debris that had jammed

against the bridge during

the flood. "These are some of my

artists," she said. During the flood, Pitts had stood on the highway bridge above the water watching the deluge, which looked like it was boiling with huge metal containers and big propane tanks that rolled over and over against the supports before finally passing under the railroad trestle.

From Riverside Drive, Pitts walked up a bank to stand on the rail line, closed by fallen trees and other debris, and gasped at the sight of a black bear lumbering away down the

tracks. Pitts took the bear sighting as a sign of nature's

resilience. Wildlife will bounce back, Pitts said. "And humans will too."

919-829-8989, @MarthaQuillin

Tropical Storm Helene closed the most famous road in Western North Carolina

BY RICHARD STRADLING rstradling@newsobserver.com

The Blue Ridge Parkway remains closed throughout North Carolina and Virginia after Tropical Storm Helene tore through the mountains last week, and the National Park Service says it doesn't know when the road will reopen.

In North Carolina, the two-lane highway meanders 252 miles from the Virginia line to the entrance of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. All 252 miles are closed, as

crews clear fallen trees and debris and assess damage to the roadway.

The park service has brought in outside help. As of Thursday afternoon, about 250 park service employees from 32 states and the District of Columbia were helping Blue Ridge Parkway staff with recovery, said spokesman Mike Litterst.

Litterst said park service teams were still doing initial inspections of the roadway.

"Based on what the teams have seen so far, significant, and in some cases catastrophic, damage has occurred along the parkway," he wrote in an email.

The worst damage, Litterst said, appears to be in a 189-mile stretch from near Grandfather Mountain to Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The damage includes places where the road was washed away and where buildings, such as the Lin-

were destroyed. Litterst said it will take weeks for the park service to fully assess the damage and begin to estimate how

ville Falls Visitor Center,

long it will take to make repairs and how much they might cost. That means the road will likely remain closed through fall foliage season, when traffic is often bumper to bumper.

parkway runs 469 miles between Shenandoah National Park in Virginia and Great Smoky **Mountains National Park** in North Carolina.

Completed in 1936, the

The parkway is both a local route for residents and a huge draw for visitors who take in the mountain air and views from numerous overlooks



The Blue Ridge Parkway at Gooch Gap, near Little Switzerland, North Carolina, after Tropical Storm Helene. The National Park Service is still assessing damage to the 469-mile road in North Carolina and Virginia.

and hiking trails along its route. The park service estimates that nearly 16.8 million people visited the parkway last year, spending nearly \$1.4 billion in nearby

communities. The National Park Service has reopened U.S. 441, also known as Newfound Gap Road, which runs

through Great Smoky **Mountains National Park** between Cherokee, North Carolina, and Gatlinburg, Tennessee. As on the parkway, commercial vehicles are prohibited on U.S. 441 through the park.

Richard Stradling: 919-829-4739, @RStradling

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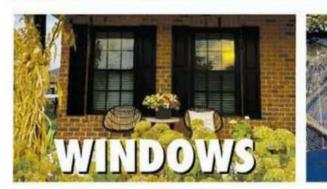
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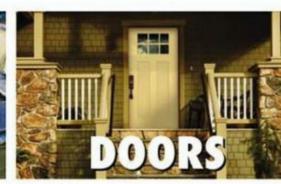
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