

Musician Ben Folds to hold concert benefiting Western NC. Here's when & where

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC) Author: Renee Umsted; Staff Writer | Section: News | 325 Words Page: 2A OpenURL Link

Ben Folds will hold a concert later this month benefiting North Carolinians affected by Helene.

The concert, scheduled for Tuesday, Oct. 29 in Wilmington, will also feature musicians from Western North Carolina.

All proceeds from the event will support charities helping with food, housing and home repairs via the North Carolina Disaster Relief Fund, managed by United Way of North Carolina.

"I'm honored to share the stage and stand in unity with other North Carolina music artists to help those whose lives and livelihoods have been tragically lost or forever altered by the horrific events triggered by Hurricane Helene," Folds, who grew up in Winston-Salem, said in a statement. "Our goal with this benefit concert is to raise awareness and funds to support the massive rebuilding efforts now underway, and that will be ongoing for months and years to come."

Tickets are now on sale for "From Wilmington, With Love," which will be held at Wilmington's Greenfield Lake Amphitheater.

This is not the first time Folds has used his musical talents to support a cause. In 2020, he was among several other North Carolina artists who participated in "Under One Roof," which asked viewers to donate to the North Carolina Arts Foundation, The News & Observer previously reported.

Folds is also not the first musician to hold a benefit concert following Helene, a storm that has left more than 100 people dead in North Carolina alone.

Luke Combs and Eric Church, along with James Taylor and Billy Strings, are giving a concert at Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte on Saturday, Oct. 26.

"I'm glad we can help, but ... I wish we were never here," Church previously told The Charlotte Observer. "So now it's a matter of trying to figure out the best way that we can rebuild where we're both from ... the place that made us who we are as artists."

Tickets for the "Concert for Carolina" go on sale at 10 a.m. Thursday, Oct. 10.

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After harrowing trek to escape flooding, man maps new start

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC) Author: Gavin Off; Staff Writer | Section: News | 743 Words

Page: 1A OpenURL Link

Danny Mancini knew it was time to take his chances in the river when Helene's floodwaters started shaking his home early Saturday.

Between midnight and 8 a.m., the Broad River flooded Mancini's Subaru WRX to the roof. Then it climbed 18 feet up a slope to the modular home Mancini built in Black Mountain two years ago.

For a few minutes after Mancini woke up, the 41-year-old south Florida transplant thought he could stay in the house.

Then water slowly seeped in and his home began loosening from its concrete foundation.

"That's when I panicked," said Mancini, an owner of four Buncombe County smoke shops.

Some days since have been a blur, Mancini said. After he escaped his home, he hiked down a mountain, hitchhiked to Asheville, slept and ate little but eventually made his way to Matthews, where he's been living in a hotel.

Like many Western North Carolina people whose homes were harmed by Helene, he's a temporary refugee, living with little more than the clothes he escaped in and the help of family and friends.

"It hasn't been easy," Mancini said, of the start of his quest to try to put his Black Mountain life back together. "I'm just grateful to be alive."

A leap into the river

When Mancini's one-story home began to move under his water-soaked shoes the morning of Sept. 28, he grabbed his phone and gold necklace and hurried out his front door onto a wooden porch left wobbly by rushing water.

He left the door open so Layla, his corgi, could escape too.

Not far downstream, he saw the top of a then-flooded tree poking out of the swollen river. So he jumped in. Just as Mancini hoped, the water rushed him directly to its branches.

From there, he could hold on, stretch his leg toward the slope and make a push for drier land.

Mancini's home, with all of his possessions, was teetering on the hill.

One of his cars, with his wallet, was submerged and the other had disappeared to who knows where.

"If I had to guess, Lake Lure," he said during a recent interview. "A 20-minute drive."

Now what?. he asked himself.

Alone, Mancini walked in the rain, through mud, around fallen trees and over landslide debris, he said.

Five hours later, around 1 p.m. Saturday, a rescue crew found Mancini on North Carolina Highway 9 and took him to

a firehouse in Fairview.

But he didn't stay long. He wanted to get off the mountain before nightfall to reach a place where there would be electricity and roads leading to family members, he said.

So Mancini walked 10 miles to U.S. 74. There, he hitchhiked to Asheville arriving around 7 p.m., and fell asleep inside one of the smoke shops that he owns.

Challenged but grateful and optimistic

At some point - Mancini doesn't know when - the Broad River took his home.

He's seen it since, ripped open and laying on top of the Subaru and halfway down the hill it once sat on. His vegetable greenhouse is gone. Same with his camper and a metal outbuilding that was his office.

Despite losing almost everything, Mancini said he can't help but to feel lucky.

None of his four Plug Smoke Shops, which he opened in the past two years, were damaged. Layla somehow made it safe to a neighbor.

His 4-year-old daughter, who was supposed to spend the night of the flood with Mancini and had never missed a scheduled night with him, was safe at her mother's house when Helene hit.

And FEMA inspectors have already visited what's left of his home. They've deposited some \$54,000 into his account - certainly not enough to replace everything he lost but more than he ever expected, Mancini said.

Mancini said he'll likely stay at a hotel in Matthews a few more days. Then he'll go to his girlfriend's in Flat Rock, a town with power, water and internet.

After that, Mancini is not sure. But he doesn't assume the worst.

"This is going to be good for me somehow," Mancini predicted.

What will he do with his property after he removes the tattered remains of his home?

He might turn it into a campground to pay the mortgage. But he won't live there.

"I'm pretty traumatized by that river and that property," he said.

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Problems with USPS might disrupt mail-in voting, elections officials say. Could it affect NC?

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC) Author: Renee Umsted; Staff Writer | Section: News | 743 Words Page: 4A OpenURL Link

Elections officials from across the United States, including North Carolina, are concerned about the ability of the U.S. Postal Service to handle mail-in votes this year.

In a Sept. 11 letter to U.S. Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, the National Association of Secretaries of State and National Association of State Election Directors outlined widespread issues with the mail system that could affect the election. The letter was signed by state election officials in many states, including Sara LaVere, the president of the North Carolina Association of Directors of Elections.

DeJoy said in response that the Postal Service is equipped to handle the election mail, that it will collect and deliver mail ballots more often in the days ahead of the Nov. 5 election and that it will keep processing centers open Sunday, Nov. 3, according to the Associated Press.

What are elections officials' concerns with the mail system?

The Sept. 11 letter describes a few issues that state and local elections officials believe could affect the upcoming general election.

Inconsistent training for Postal Service workers: Staff are uninformed about the service's policies regarding election mail, which has led to ballots being delayed, held deliberately or processed improperly.

Long delivery times: In the past, local officials have received timely postmarked ballots after Election Day and outside the Postal Service's First Class delivery window.

Increase in mail returned as undeliverable: Mail sent to voters or ballots sent to election offices are returned to sender, marked as undeliverable, even when mail is addressed properly or voters haven't moved. Voters may be disenfranchised or be put on the path to having their registration record canceled.

According to a report from the U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General released July 2024, an audit found "processes and policies that could pose a risk of delays in the processing and delivery of Election and Political Mail," along with issues that "pose a risk of individual ballots not being counted."

The report observed 15 mail processing facilities and 35 delivery units in 13 states and Puerto Rico, including one mail processing center and two two delivery units in North Carolina.

Will issues with the mail system affect NC voting?

The Postal Service is able to work with county boards of elections across the state, said Karen Brinson Bell, the executive director of the North Carolina State Board of Elections.

"Delivery and receipt of mail seems to be happening with all county boards of elections at this point," she said during a meeting with the press on Monday, Oct. 7.

The state board has a "good working relationship" with the Postal Service and meets with the service regularly to discuss issues regarding the sending and receiving of absentee ballots, Patrick Gannon, the public information director for the North Carolina State Board of Elections, told The News & Observer in an email.

There is a distinction, however, between the Postal Service's accessibility to county boards of elections and the service's accessibility to communities, said Paul Cox, general counsel for the state board. Especially after Helene, some communities may be difficult for the Postal Service to reach.

The state board will not change deadlines for receiving mail-in ballots.

"The messaging is already out there that these are the deadlines, and because of some of the communication channel issues, difficulty in cell service and internet connectivity, it is very hard to communicate a different deadline to voters," Brinson Bell said Oct. 7.

All absentee ballots must be received by 7:30 p.m. on Election Day, which is Tuesday, Nov. 5.

What can voters do to mitigate USPS issues?

Voters are encouraged to return ballots to their county board of elections as quickly as possible, Danner McCulloh, the public records coordinator for Wake County Board of Elections, told The N&O.

Ballots may be returned by mail or in person.

* If returning in person, ballots may be dropped off at the voter's county board of elections office or to an early voting site between Thursday, Oct. 17 and Saturday, Nov. 2. Absentee ballots may be returned to a voter's county board of elections office on Election Day, but voters may not return the ballot to a polling place on Election Day.

Voters should mail their completed ballot at least one week before their state's deadline, DeJoy wrote in the letter responding to elections officials.

How many people vote by mail in North Carolina?

During the 2022 general election, 187,746 people voted by mail, according to the State Board of Elections.

In the 2020 general election, 18% of ballots cast in North Carolina were absentee by mail votes.

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With Hurricane Milton aimed at Florida, NHL's Tampa Bay Lightning head to Triangle early

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC) Author: Chip Alexander; Staff Writer | Section: Sports | 814 Words Page: 2B

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Morrisville The Carolina Hurricanes and Tampa Bay Lightning will open the 2024-25 NHL hockey season Friday at the Lenovo Center. That much we know.

And beyond that? Who can say?

The Hurricanes and Lightning are scheduled to play again Saturday night at Amalie Arena in Tampa, Florida. But with Hurricane Milton set to slam into western Florida, with evacuation orders in place, there is much uncertainty about such things as hockey games.

The Lightning left Florida on Monday to come to the Triangle, canceling a final preseason game against Nashville. The team is staying in Chapel Hill after some hastily made reservations and practiced Tuesday at Invisalign Arena in Morrisville.

The players were allowed to bring their families and pets with them to North Carolina, Lightning general manager Julien BriseBois said Tuesday. All of the staffers also made the extended trip, he said.

For now, no one can say if the game Saturday in Tampa can or will be played. Or what will happen if it's not played..

"This is not ideal," BriseBois said.

N.C. State has a football game against Syracuse on Saturday night at Carter-Finley Stadium, which could create logistical problems with holding a game at the Lenovo Center.

Playing Sunday at Lenovo Center might be an option. But BriseBois noted that should Hurricane Milton preclude a return to Florida because of extensive storm damage, the team likely would not be in the proper mindset to play Sunday.

"It's unfortunate what's going on, right, but what I see out of the guys is it's a burden being disrupted in what we're doing but we have the ability to bring our families and loved ones and pets with us," Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper said Tuesday. "There is a bigger picture, as I told our guys. We got to get away. There are a lot of people at home who haven't been able to get away, so a lot of our thoughts are that hopefully everybody is going to be OK and what can we do when we get back to help everybody out."

For now, so much remains in flux.

"I've heard they might not be going back after our game, so whether that means we'll be playing here, I'm not quite sure how it will unfold," Canes captain Jordan Staal said Tuesday. "It's part of the gig when things like this happen, and you battle through big things and small things and how schedules work. We'll play the game (Friday) and figure it out as we go.

"It's not just our team but their team, too. Obviously they're displaced from their homes and going through a lot more stuff than we are."

Staal noted his parents had a Florida vacation home near Naples, saying he was "praying for everyone that it

doesn't look as bad as it does right now."

First there was Hurricane Helene, which worked its way north and into Western North Carolina, leaving behind much destruction and loss of life. Now, Hurricane Milton, which rapidly became a Category 5 storm in the Gulf of Mexico and was growing in intensity at an explosive rate.

The storm was expected to make landfall on Florida's Gulf Coast on Wednesday, the projected path taking it near Tampa, an area that has not had a direct hit from a major hurricane since 1921.

"At the end of the day as long as your family is safe that's the most important thing," Tampa Bay forward Luke Glendening said Tuesday.

The Lightning took the ice at noon for its practice. Missing was forward Jake Guentzel, who played for the Canes last season before being traded to Tampa Bay and then signed, but Cooper said he expected Guentzel to be ready for the opener.

The Hurricanes did not practice Tuesday but held team meetings at Invisalign.

"We planned it this way," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Tuesday. "Obviously you don't want to practice four days in a row going into a game. We'll get in a couple of practices, then drop the puck.

"I think everybody has been ready and itching for a while to play a real game, so I think we'll be ready to roll."

Many NHL teams will have played their season openers before Friday, leaving the Canes somewhat antsy about getting on the ice, getting started.

The Canes took a trip Monday to Fort Liberty in Fayetteville. Later Monday, a 25-man roster for opening day was turned into the league.

"For me, going there was important just to show our appreciation for what those guys do for us," Brind'Amour said. "It's very understated, in my opinion. It's nice to kind of be in their area and hang out with those guys a little bit. To get our guys around that environment is always good."

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N&O, Observer journalists raced to where Helene hit Western NC hard. Read our coverage.

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: David Raynor and Jessica Banov, News & Observer Section: north carolina | 117 Words OpenURL Link

To really comprehend the damage Helene left behind in North Carolina, you had to see it, and hear the stories of people who survived.

News & Observer and Charlotte Observer journalists joined forces to do just that as soon as it was safe to get on the ground after Helene's heavy rain, flooding and landslides started Sept. 27.

In addition to the historic destruction, loss of life and uncertainty in Western North Carolina, the journalists found resilience and creativity among people much more accustomed to welcoming tourists than FEMA staff.

Below are some of our stories focused on hard-hit communities.

To read all of our Helene coverage visit charlotteobserver.com/topics/helene-nc or newsobserver.com/topics/helene-nc.

Extra wide graphic CSS

McClatchy reporting on Helene map embed

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Temporary housing database launched for families displaced by Hurricane Helene

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Chantal Allam, News & Observer | Section: real estate news | 408 Words OpenURL Link

Local real estate groups have launched a website aimed at helping people displaced by Hurricane Helene in Western North Carolina to find temporary housing.

HurricaneHomes.org - built by Cary-based doorify Multiple Listing Service (MLS) in collaboration with Canopy Realtor Association and Solid Earth - offers a curated list of active rental properties around the state.

It also shows additional listings from other states for those seeking housing outside the region.

"We wanted to leverage the thousands of active rental listings we already have in the MLS," said Matt Fowler, CEO of doorify MLS, in a release. "By making these listings visible, we [hope] to create a resource that simplifies the process of locating housing."

doorify MLS covers 16 counties - including Wake, Durham, Johnston and Orange - and is the operating system for over 15,000 real estate brokers and agents in five Realtor associations in the greater Triangle.

The database's launch comes as the group seeks to rebrand as more "consumer facing and transparent" amid sweeping industry changes to Realtors' compensation.

HurricaneHomes.org has around 45,000 listings. They range from one- to four-bedrooms, in metros like Charlotte, Durham and Raleigh, as well as in outskirt towns like Knightdale.

Rentals starts as low as \$995 per month, depending on location and type.

Screen Shot 2024-10-10 at 10.25.06 AM.pngA screenshot of HurricaneHomes.org - a website built by Cary-based doorify Multiple Listing Service (MLS) in collaboration with Canopy Realtor Association and Solid Earth - aimed at helping displaced residents find temporary housing.

doorify MLS is also encouraging its listing brokers to identify properties that could be temporarily offered as rentals, Fowler said. "This is a small way we can help those displaced by Hurricane Helene," he said.

Separately, FEMA is accepting housing assistance applications throughout areas affected by Helene.

Shelter numbers continue to decline, with 17 shelters housing just more than 700 occupants, FEMA said on Oct. 9.

Over 2,600 people who cannot return home are staying in lodging through FEMA's Transitional Shelter Assistance program.

FEMA said residents in counties covered by the federal emergency declaration who have applied for disaster assistance may be eligible to stay temporarily in a hotel or motel paid for by FEMA while they work on their long-term housing plan.

People do not need to request this assistance, FEMA said. FEMA will notify them of their eligibility through an automated phone call, text message or email, depending upon the method they selected in their application.

For current application timelines, visit disasterassistance.gov or FEMA's state-specific Helene disaster site for North Carolina.

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Largest Spruce Pine quartz mine restarts after Helene battered mountain town

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Brian Gordon, News & Observer | Section: business | 532 Words OpenURL Link

Two weeks after shutting down its Spruce Pine facilities ahead of Hurricane Helene, Belgian mining company Sibelco announced Thursday it has restarted operations in the Western North Carolina town that contains the world's highest-purity quartz.

"Both production and shipments are progressively ramping up to full capacity," the company said in a statement, though it did not share how long this progress would take. Last week, Sibelco said its initial assessment of the sites had revealed only "minor damage," but power remained out even a week after the storm.

Heavy rainfalls from Helene flooded the North Toe River and battered Spruce Pine, a mountain town in Mitchell County with around 2,000 residents. In the storm's aftermath, many nationwide inquired about the status of the local guartz mines that are critical to the supply chains of semiconductors, solar panels, and other devices.

Few, if any, other places on earth match Spruce Pine quartz for quality. A lack of water in the region around 380 million years ago helped produce an ultra-pure crystalline mineral, and when it comes to manufacturing the semiconductor wafers that get cut into chips, purity is essential. Even a tiny impurity, such 50 parts per billion, can ruin final products.

"The more perfect the atomic structure in your silicon, the more easily and freely electrons can flow around," wrote author Ed Conway in his 2023 book "Material World," which dedicates a section to the Spruce Pine mines.

During most of the 20th century, local miners extracted mica and feldspar from the Mitchell County sites. Over the past three decades, new technological demands have made high-purity quartz one of North Carolina's most important exports.

Between 2019 and 2023, Sibelco said its Spruce Pine sites produced almost 60% more high-quality quartz. And last year, the company announced it would invest \$200 million into the site by 2025 to double production. It is now the largest employer in Mitchell County, according to the N.C. Department of Commerce.

100324-HELENE-KLM-03.jpgMarlin King, a volunteer from Pennsylvania, helps to clear mud and debris from Locust Street on Thursday, Oct. 3, 2024, in Spruce Pine, N.C. following damage from Hurricane Helene.

The company sells its quartz under the brand name IOTA. Its mines are north of downtown in an area called the Spruce Pine Mining District. On Google Maps they look like wide, white sandy beaches.

Sibelco is one of two quartz mining operations in Spruce Pine, with a competitor named The Quartz Corp forming in 2011. While Sibelco is headquartered Antwerp, Belgium, The Quartz Corp is based in Spruce Pine.

In an Oct. 2 online post, The Quartz Corp said its initial plant inspection suggested "that damage is mostly concentrated around ancillary units."

"It is still too early to assess when TQC will resume operations as this will also depend on the rebuilding of local infrastructure," the company said.

The News & Observer reported roads and rail lines around the town suffered significant damage when the storm passed through on Sept. 27.

Despite its continued closure, The Quartz Corp said supply shortfalls are not likely.

"We operate a long supply chain and like many organizations we added more focus on our resilience planning post-Covid," the company said, noting it has backup stock of finished products.

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In Western NC, Helene rattles the faith of some while others vow to rebuild

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Adam Wagner, News & Observer | Section: north carolina | 1308 Words OpenURL Link

Margie Derwort's friends told her to flee her home during Tropical Storm Helene, worried that the two-story red house the 81-year-old has lived in for almost five decades would be inundated by the heavy rains.

But Derwort and her son, Michael, stayed. They watched as muddy water ran down the steep slope behind the house, running around both sides of it into the front yard.

Then came the knock at the door. It was one of their neighbors, Michael Derwort recalled, clad only in sweatpants. The man was soaking wet and distraught, saying he couldn't reach his wife.

SALUDAHELENE-NE-100724-RTW_11.jpgA landslide during Hurricane Helene destroyed this home on US 176 between Saluda and Tryon, photographed on Monday, October 7, 2024. A Polk County spokeswoman confirmed the death of a woman who lived in the structure. Her husband survived and walked next door to seek help from neighbors Michael Derwort and his mom Margie Derwort

It quickly became clear that the home next door, set some ways back from the road, had collapsed in a landslide. The man, who had been downstairs, had somehow been bounced out of a window. After drying off and being given a hoodie, Margie Derwort said, the man quickly moved on to check in on other neighbors.

His wife, who had been upstairs, was killed. A Polk County spokeswoman confirmed the woman's death to The News & Observer but did not identify her.

SALUDAHELENE-NE-100724-RTW_9.jpgA hot tub and lounge chair remain untouched after a landslide destroyed the adjacent home on US 176 between Saluda and Tryon, N.C., photographed on Monday, October 7, 2024. A Polk County spokeswoman confirmed the death of a woman who lived in the structure.

Everyone in Western North Carolina has a story about how they fared during Helene, which wreaked devastation across the region almost two weeks ago.

In the wake of that storm, some have decided that if they could weather Helene, they can weather anything. Others are shifting the other way, rattled by Helene's torrential rains and the flooding and hundreds of landslides that followed, leaving wide swaths of the region without basic services like cell signal, electricity and water for days.

Margie Derwort is in the latter camp, keenly interested in selling her home on U.S. 176 about four miles east of Saluda's downtown after Helene's impacts came so close.

"I am scared now. I need to leave if I can sell it. I need to do that," Derwort told The News & Observer on Monday.

Derwort's age is part of her thinking, as is her son's health. Michael is still coping with the effects from a battle with colon cancer.

SALUDAHELENE-NE-100724-RTW_13.jpgMichael Derwort and his mother Margie Derwort at their home near Saluda, N.C., on Monday, October 7, 2024. The Derworts describe how Hurricane Helene destroyed the house next door, killing one person.

'A mess' outside of Saluda

When a reporter approached, Derwort and Michael were sitting on their front porch with a friend.

They had just returned home after six days in a nearby inn, taken into downtown Saluda by the National Guard after the worst of Helene passed through. The yard around the slightly raised porch was still squishy to the step, and the power wasn't back on inside the house yet.

Margie Derwort said the home has a "bad history" and described how her husband had been killed about 20 years ago when a tree fell on his car nearby.

As badly as she wants to leave, the Derworts can't afford to just pick up and go. She needs somebody to buy her current house first

"You don't know what to do or which way to turn. Finances aren't where you can just go out and make a change, I'd have to sell the house. Now, how long will it take me to sell it? I can't move without money," Derwort said.

About 400 feet to the west, where the home had collapsed, a gate was pulled shut. A hand-written sign was laced through the iron bars, black letters traced with orange highlighter reading, "DANGER No Trespassing!! Mudslide in Progress." Large chunks of debris had collected in a stream bed along that home's property line.

SALUDAHELENE-NE-100724-RTW_5.jpgA sign warning of a mudslide at a property on US 176 between Saluda and Tryon, N.C., photographed on Monday, October 7, 2024.

"This is a mess," Michael Derwort said.

U.S. 176 is closed just to the east of the Derworts' home. The road is damaged in several places by landslides from above, while shelves of asphalt dangle over the North Pacolet River in other places, the earth that was supporting them washed away.

RAL_SALUDAHELENE-NE-100724-RTW_2.JPGU.S. 176 between Saluda and Tryon, N.C., is closed on Monday, Oct. 7, 2024, due to numerous landslides and flooding from Hurricane Helene.

Rapid response in a mountain retreat

About a mile down that road is a long, steep driveway that wends past two waterfalls before ending at a home overlooking U.S. 176 and the river below.

Michael Bell has lived at the top of that driveway for about nine months. He moved there from Los Angeles, seeking to escape the chaos and crowds of the city.

Like many others in the region, Bell admits that he did not expect that Helene would be so severe.

"I wasn't prepared for this. I didn't think that the rain was going to hit as hard as it did," Bell said Monday while one work crew dug in the soil around his front door and another spread gravel at the base of his 1,900-foot driveway.

RAL_SALUDAHELENE-NE-100724-RTW_3.JPGMichael Bell describes how he rode out Hurricane Helene at his home off of US 176 near Tryon, N.C., on Monday, October 7, 2024.

As Helene passed over the 30-acre property on Sept. 27, Bell walked down to the uppermost waterfall, one short hill down from his house. There, he saw the normally relaxing falls gushing, black water flying off the mountain side to meet water flying off the mountain in two other places just to the east.

"I never saw something more disgusting in my life," Bell said.

Debris carried in that water clogged a culvert at the bottom of Bell's driveway. That led to significant erosion of the

driveway, which along with downed trees would leave Bell stranded at the top of the hill for days after the storm.

Bell returned to the house and noticed that the wind was starting to roar. Trees in the forest around the house were tilting in the gusts, some toppling over.

Then, Bell said, a red oak toppled over and slammed into the roof. The mature tree miraculously did not break through, but its weight was braced against the roof.

Bell scrambled as soon as the storm passed over, taking his chainsaw and cutting an A-shaped notch into the log to ease the weight that was resting on the roof.

Asked if he was worried about his safety at any point, Bell said, "I was so caught up with just trying to save the structure and everything else, there wasn't really time for that."

The tree cracked an eave inside, but it didn't cause any leaks or more significant damage.

In the days that followed, Bell rewired his well so he could power it with his generator and draw water from it. It would take nine days for power to be restored.

As the sound of the work crews' heavy machinery buzzed around him, Bell sounded a defiant note. Having made it through Helene, he said, his confidence in his new home was bolstered, his ability to live through any disaster there upheld.

"I don't care what it takes. I'm going to rebuild and I can bounce back," Bell said. "I can get through anything."

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'It reinstills your faith in people.' What Western NC lawmakers say about Helene aftermath

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC)
Author: Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan and Avi Bajpai, News & Observer Section: politics government | 1727 Words
OpenURL Link

As North Carolina's 170 state lawmakers returned to Raleigh on Wednesday to pass a Hurricane Helene relief package, they brought stories of what they've seen, and what they want, in their devastated districts.

Here's what many in the self-described "mountain delegation" have said about Helene, and the response so far:

'A very isolating event'

« Republican Rep. Tim Moffitt, who represents Henderson, Polk and Rutherford counties:

"We've often complained here in Raleigh as the mountain delegation, that the mountains are often forgotten, that we're often overlooked, and that the rest of the state tends to be the beneficiary of all the efforts that begin here in Raleigh," Moffitt told reporters on Wednesday.

"We're different: We're mountain folks, we're tough, we're resilient, and we're uncomfortable in the spotlight, but it is needed. When you wake up, there's a total collapse of telecommunications, your power, your water, your sewer, your roads and your bridges. It is a very isolating event. This is something that is beyond description," he said.

RAL_100124-HELENE-KLM-07 (1).JPGA sign offers encouragement along Highway 421 in Boone, N.C. on Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2024, days after Hurricane Helene brought heavy rain and flooding to the North Carolina mountains.

On the Senate floor, Moffitt spoke extensively to thank everyone from both the public and private sectors for their help.

"It reinstills your faith in people," he said.

Moffitt talked about what happened right after the storm, for those left on their own and determining who they'll rely on for help.

"So who are you going to rely on? Go up in the mountains. Go listen to rednecks just like me. They're the first wave of first responders, with the chainsaws and with the 4-wheelers, and they're out in the hills and the hollers and they're checking on their neighbors. They're the ones that have the skid steers and the miniature trackhoes. They deploy themselves, and they get out there and they start working with their neighbors. And this is all while our first responders, our volunteer fire departments, our sheriff's departments are really trying to assess the scope of the need and how they're going deploy their assets in order to best serve our citizens," Moffitt said.

Others in the first wave included the faith community, he said, and local churches rose to the occasion.

"So all of this is going on while the bigger picture is starting to come together. So heartfelt gratitude for all of our our unofficial first responders, and thank you for being there. Our sheriffs and our deputies, they did a great job. Our volunteer fire departments, they did a great job, and they're still doing a great job, and we're doing our best to relieve them with volunteers from other parts of the state and other parts of the nation," he said.

Water treatment 'unsalvageable'

« Republican Sen. Ralph Hise of Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Caldwell, Haywood, Madison, Mitchell, Watauga and Yancey counties:

"This is by far the most devastating thing I've ever experienced. Many of the areas I represent - all the counties I represent - have been devastated by the storm," Hise said.

"We've had entire counties without water, power, sewer, cell service. We've been trying to rescue areas - there's still areas you can't access unless you're on a motorcycle, unless you're on side-by-sides, communities that are tied off. We've had an incredible outpouring from so many communities across the state and others, but we're in a long term recovery ... Mitchell County, the water treatment system for the entire county, both towns - it's gone. It does not exist. It's unsalvageable. It's a four-year process to put a water treatment plant back in. We don't have a temporary solution to these things right now."

kimball_Helene_BlackMtn15_10424.jpgLucy Poe sorts through canned goods Friday, Oct. 4, 2024 in Black Mountain, N.C.

"People at the fire departments every day are having the first hot meal they've had in more than two weeks. We have a lot of things to ask for. I'm excited to be here today to see that we're asking as a community for the support of the state, and that the state of North Carolina is stepping up to do that initially. And so there's a lot of distrust in the areas I have, but I hope we can begin to show that North Carolina is stepping up with responsibility, and we are here," Hise said.

'FEMA showed up'

« Democratic Sen. Julie Mayfield of Buncombe County:

Mayfield said during the Senate floor debate that "nothing happens as fast as you want it to. And the first couple of days were terrifying because things weren't coming."

"But then they did start to come, and the National Guard is there, pulling people out of houses. And that's still happening, still happening. FEMA showed up. And despite what you read on the internet, and don't believe any of it, FEMA is everywhere," Mayfield said.

RAL_HELENE-NE-100624-RTW_23.JPGFEMA employee Jirau Alvaro navigates beneath fallen trees on a damaged bridge on NC 9 above the Broad River on Sunday, October 6, 2024 in rural Buncombe County, near Black Mountain, N.C.

People living 'up to the best versions of themselves'

« Democratic Rep. Caleb Rudow of Buncombe County:

"There have been a few moments in my life when I've been able to see people live up to the best versions of themselves, to step up to a tremendous challenge, to, regardless of the odds, run into danger to save the neighbor, and that is what I saw so many times over the past 12 days," Rudow said on the House floor.

"I saw neighbors helping neighbors. I saw first responders perform acts of heroism that were just incredible. I saw communities come together. I saw people drive from all over this country, and all over the world, to come and help us."

Rudow said the photos of the destruction "don't do it justice," and "don't show the terrifying power of this storm." He said that in some areas, flood waters rose 25 feet above normal levels.

As a point of illustrating that to his colleagues, Rudow told lawmakers to look up at the the blinds above the gallery in the House chamber.

"If you look, right up there to the top of those blinds, that is 25 feet high," Rudow said. "And you imagine that

power in a river moving downstream, and that is a pressure washer that washes away houses, blows houses into bridges, that takes out the bridges, that destroys people's lives."

RAL_100224-HURRICANE-HELENE-TEL-26.JPGInches of mud cover Biltmore Village in Asheville on Wednesday October 2, 2204. The area received extensive damage from flooding of the Swannanoa River after the remnants of Hurricane Helene caused torrential rainfall in western North Carolina.

Heating, housing solutions needed

« Republican Rep. Dudley Greene of Avery, McDowell, Mitchell and Yancey counties:

"There was not a corner of my district that wasn't impacted, if not decimated, by this storm," Greene said.

"The injury has occurred, hopefully we are starting to get the bleeding stopped up that way. And this will be the first step for healing to begin. We still have people in shelters, so we're starting to look for what's a housing solution for folks up there, what's a heating solution for folks up there," he said.

DudleyGreene.jpgRepublican Rep. Dudley Greene talks about the impact of Hurricane Helene in his Western NC district, which includes Avery, McDowell, Mitchell and Yancey counties, during a news conference on Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2024 at the N.C. Legislative Building in Raleigh, N.C.

'Thank God we have the rainy day fund'

« Republican Sen. Kevin Corbin of Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, Swain and Transylvania counties:

"I thank God we have the rainy day fund. I thank God it's there," Corbin said during the Senate floor debate on the bill. "We have over \$4 billion in the rainy day fund, because in Western North Carolina, we had a rainy day. That's what it's for," Corbin said.

The \$273 million Hurricane Helene relief bill uses money from the Savings Reserve fund, which is also known as the rainy day fund.

RAL_100124-HELENE-KLM-08.JPGVehicles and machinery sit underneath debris near the North Toe River in Avery County on Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2024, days after Hurricane Helene brought heavy rain and flooding to the North Carolina mountains.

'Start their lives over again'

« Republican Rep. Jennifer Balkcom, Henderson County:

"Back home, people are trying to start their lives over again," Balkcom said Wednesday.

"The lives in the mountains are different. We're strong, we're resilient. We will rebuild, absolutely, and a lot of times we hate asking for help. I know that myself, and I promise I wasn't going to cry, but people are still needing help, even though they don't ask for it. And this is just a start. This is a start to help give people what they need. Our community has come together. It's been such a blessing to see the strength that is out in Western North Carolina," she said.

She thanked everyone across the state who has helped, including those who sent supplies.

kimball_Helene_BlackMtn8_10424.jpgLashonda Lytle, center, Robert Wharton, right, fill buckets with water Friday, Oct. 4, 2024 in Black Mountain, N.C.

'Need to show folks that the government has their back'

« Democratic Rep. Lindsey Prather of Buncombe County:

Prather praised the response and coordination by officials at all levels of government.

She said lawmakers were in touch with and receiving updates from Gov. Roy Cooper, FEMA, the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, and the military, but she highlighted officials at the local level too, including the Buncombe County emergency management director, local fire chiefs, and volunteers.

"This is personal, and y'all know that," Prather said. "Western North Carolina is a special place, unlike any other. The people are creative, and caring, and resourceful, and resilient. The mountains are homey, and lush, and lifegiving. Each little community has its own character and style, but we are all mountain folk."

Prather said everyone had stepped up to help however they could, including local radio stations that provided news, but also some "musical levity" to their communities, restaurants that immediately began to give away what they could, and neighbors who checked in on each other before emergency officials could even reach them.

"We need to show folks that the government has their back, right now, at the time they need it most," she said.

"Not just in my district, but in all of Western North Carolina, the vacation land that people watched get ravaged on TV."

"It's a permanent home to many, many people. Please don't forget us."

Under The Dome embed (2022)

New Under the Dome newsletter subscriber embed (graybox)

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Despite false claims, no technology exists to create massive hurricanes, experts say

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Mary Helen Moore, News & Observer | Section: north carolina | 785 Words OpenURL Link

You may have read the falsehoods spread on social media suggesting people, not nature, created Hurricane Helene.

Though people do have the means to encourage rainfall on a small scale, no technology exists that would allow anyone to create a hurricane, experts say.

That's because hurricanes require massive amounts of energy to form, explained Chip Konrad, a University of North Carolina professor whose research focuses on the science of extreme weather.

"They're very strong, and they occur over a very broad area, and there's just a tremendous amount of energy that's required to create them and also to maintain them," Konrad said.

Helene originated from a thunderstorm in the western Caribbean first observed on Sept. 23, according to NASA. Its first recorded coordinates are around 1,500 miles from North Carolina, and the National Hurricane Center tracked the storm continuously.

When Helene made landfall Sept. 26, tropical storm-force winds extended more than 300 miles from its center. That's approximately the distance from Raleigh to Cherokee.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's research division says no weather modification technology could produce or steer such a storm.

462386305_991678906097260_6128712482360706675_n.jpgDamage shown at Chimney Rock Gemstone Mine after Hurricane Helene.

"Hurricanes Helene and Milton, like all hurricanes, formed on their own due to the right conditions of sea surface temperature and upper atmospheric winds," NOAA spokesperson Monica Allen said in an email.

It takes months of heat over spring and summer to warm the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico enough to create powerful hurricanes, said Konrad, who also directs NOAA's Southeast Regional Climate Center.

"That energy gradually builds up, and that's what it requires to get a hurricane," he said. "Think about how big the oceans are. And it takes a long time in the natural world."

Conspiracy theories spread after Hurricane Helene

U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican from Georgia, has amplified conspiracy theories on social media that suggest the hurricanes that have hit the Southeast this year are tools of voter suppression ahead of the 2024 election.

"Yes they can control the weather. It's ridiculous for anyone to lie and say it can't be done," Greene wrote Oct. 3.

Democratic President Joe Biden dismissed the idea Oct. 9 as "beyond ridiculous."

RAL_100124-HURRICANE-HELENE-TEL-33.JPGAn aerial view of downtown Marshall on Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2024 after the French Broad River caused catastrophic flooding. The remnants of Hurricane Helene caused widespread flooding, downed trees, and power outages in western North Carolina.

Greene followed up Oct. 8 with a link to NOAA's records of attempts at weather modification. The agency has tracked 1,026 such attempts since 1972.

The most common reasons listed on the site are increasing rain and snowfall by cloud seeding, "usually for the purpose of increasing the local water supply," according to NOAA.

That's typically done out west, not in the less drought-prone Southeast, Konrad said, and could never produce rainfall on the scale brought by Helene.

"The thing about cloud seeding is it can only be effective at a local scale. So, you could make it rain, maybe, a little bit more in one place, but you can't make it rain over a broad area," Konrad said.

Helene brought more than 10 inches of rain to much of Western North Carolina, but large areas saw 18 inches from the tropical storm and the rain that fell the two days before. The N.C. State Climate Office's highest measurement for Sept. 25 to Sept. 27 was more than 31 inches at Busick, in Yancey County.

RAL_100124-HURRICANE-HELENE-TEL-08.JPGResidents and volunteers clean up on Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2024 after the French Broad River flooded downtown Marshall. The remnants of Hurricane Helene caused widespread flooding, downed trees, and power outages in western North Carolina.

The U.S. government did experiments decades ago that aimed to weaken hurricanes, not strengthen or create them, according to NOAA records.

In 1947, military scientists working with General Electric on Project Cirrus dumped crushed dry ice into a hurricane after it had passed over Florida into the Atlantic, according to NOAA. Instead of weakening, the storm strengthened and veered into southern Georgia. Experts were unsure if the swerve was caused by the scientists, but the public was outraged and the efforts were abandoned.

From 1962 to 1983, the government used silver iodide to weaken storms further from land under Project Stormfury. The results were inconclusive, according to an account published in the American Meteorological Society in 1985.

"Since then NOAA has done no weather modification," Allen said. "The primary concern about altering weather is that you could make things worse, such as the case of using nuclear bombs on hurricanes - a common recommendation NOAA receives from the public."

NC Reality Check is an N&O series holding those in power accountable and shining a light on public issues that affect the Triangle or North Carolina. Have a suggestion for a future story? Email realitycheck@newsobserver.com

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Wake County firefighter rescued dog in Western NC, then couldn't let her go

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Lexi Solomon, News & Observer | Section: wake county | 629 Words OpenURL Link

Korey Floyd went to Western North Carolina to help save lives after Hurricane Helene. He didn't expect to bring home a companion.

Floyd, 23, has worked for the Wake Forest Fire Department for four years. His latest mission took him to Mitchell County as part of a swift water rescue team.

Deployed two days before Helene hit, Floyd spent 10 days in some of the hardest-hit parts of the state with 11 other firefighters, helping to cut trees, do welfare checks and more.

Several days in, Floyd's team drove down a road near Bakersville, a town of about 700 people between Boone and Asheville, where they found a group of sheriff's deputies cutting up a fallen tree - and a deputy's wife holding a dog.

KoreyFloyd2.jpgWake Forest firefighter Korey Floyd, 23, poses with Lulu the dog Oct. 9, 2024, at the Wake Forest Fire Department. Floyd and his colleagues rescued Lulu in Mitchell County while helping with Hurricane Helene rescue and relief efforts.

The black and white pitbull mix had been wandering on the road, the woman told Floyd. She'd tried to find the owner, but no one in the community recognized the dog.

"So we went up and said, 'We'll take it for you, look around for you, try to find the owner,'" Floyd recalled.

After traveling a couple of miles up the road and back, asking anyone in sight if they recognized the dog, Floyd and his colleagues realized the pit mix would likely go to the pound if no one took her in.

"We went and got her scanned; she has no microchip," he said. "So we ended up taking her home and trying to give her a better life than she would have had."

They named the dog Lulu and got the Mitchell County animal shelter to ask its Facebook followers if anyone recognized her. As the firefighters waited for responses, they took Lulu back to the Bakersville station, giving her food and water and enjoying time with her in between tasks.

"Whenever we went back to the station, we'd go say hi to her, play with her a little bit," Floyd said. "It brought everybody's mood up."

Floyd laughed with colleagues about taking Lulu home, but when the time came to return to Wake Forest on Sunday and the dog still didn't have an owner, he realized it was no longer a joke.

Already the owner of a 3-year-old beagle mix, Winston, and a gaggle of chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys, Floyd decided he'd bring Lulu home with him.

LuluandWinston.jpgKorey Floyd's dogs, Lulu, left, and Winston, right, curl up together in the backseat of a car. Floyd says the two have become fast friends after he rescued Lulu during post-Helene rescue and relief efforts in Mitchell County.

"She's great with the other dog and with the birds and everything," he said. "She loves them all. She doesn't try to

attack [Winston] or anything."

Capt. Kyle Mangum, Floyd's supervisor, said Floyd's decision to rescue Lulu is an example of his generous spirit.

"He wanted to give her a home to be loved in," Mangum said. "He has contacts with the community that he found her in and is still trying to locate the owners. Korey is just that kindhearted of a person."

A veterinarian estimated Lulu is 2 or 3 years old, Floyd said. She's been given all her shots and is being treated for two tick-borne diseases and a bout of worms - but overall, she's healthy, he said.

"She helps a lot," Floyd said. "She's always just there, ready to hang out and chill with us."

The calm, playful pup is an example of how Floyd and first responders like him can save human lives and animal lives, he said.

"We try to do what we can for both," he said. "You can help an animal out just like a human."

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Under the Dome: Legislature passes \$273 million in Helene relief, FEMA takes over migrant housing

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Danielle Battaglia, News & Observer | Section: politics government | 1099 Words OpenURL Link

Good morning and welcome to the Under the Dome newsletter. I'm Emily Vespa.

State lawmakers unanimously passed a \$273 million Helene relief bill Wednesday, which leaders say is just the first step in what will be a long recovery. There will be another legislative session Oct. 24 to pass another round of relief. Read more from Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan and Kyle Ingram on how the money will be spent.

FROM MIGRANT HOUSING TO FEMA AID

Sen. Thom Tillis and Rep. Richard Hudson led the nine Republican members of the North Carolina congressional delegation in asking the federal Department of Health and Human Services to sign over a care facility in Greensboro – meant to house migrant children in the country without legal authorization – to the Federal Emergency Management Agency to help people displaced by Hurricane Helene.

On Wednesday, FEMA confirmed that that transfer will take place.

In a written statement, a FEMA spokesperson said transferring the Greensboro facility to FEMA is part of a "comprehensive, whole-of-government approach" to help those affected by the storm.

In the letter to HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra and FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell, the lawmakers noted that the Greensboro facility has hundreds of beds and facilities for medical care, meals and education. While it became ready for use this spring, migrant children were never placed there.

The lawmakers suggested using the facility for the thousands of people displaced by the storm, or as a staging area for aid workers.

"We believe that this ICF (influx care facility) could be repurposed to support the state's rescue and recovery efforts," the letter stated.

The letter was signed by Sen. Ted Budd and Reps. Chuck Edwards, Virginia Foxx, Patrick McHenry, Greg Murphy, David Rouzer and Dan Bishop.

"This already controversial migrant facility has gone unused for years, which is why Rep. Hudson and I have been pushing the Biden Administration to use it instead for Helene recovery efforts," Tillis said Wednesday in a written statement to McClatchy. "I'm glad they've listened and this facility can now be put to better use by helping North Carolinians in their moment of need."

- Danielle Battaglia

FEMA FUNDING FACT-CHECK

After the Homeland Security secretary last week warned that FEMA can meet immediate needs but is short of funding to make it through hurricane season, some are wrongly blaming agency spending on migrant services for draining disaster relief funds.

Contrary to claims made by former President Donald Trump and Elon Musk, FEMA did not divert disaster relief funds

to house people who are living in the country without legal authorization.

Some Trump supporters amplifying this claim are alluding to a migrant services program funded by U.S. Customs and Border Protection money at Congress' direction. FEMA distributed about \$650 million last fiscal year under the program to relieve overcrowding in temporary shelters.

Others, like right-wing X user Libs of TikTok, are referring to a FEMA program that helps provide food and shelter to those in need. Congress previously appropriated funds under the program to a now-defunct arm that provided humanitarian relief for migrants, which was replaced by the CBP-funded program.

FEMA's disaster fund, which supports federal disaster relief, is a separate spigot.

The disaster relief fund is being used to provide a one-time payment of \$750 to households impacted by Helene to help survivors cover immediate costs like food, water and hygiene items while they apply for more assistance. It's a new grant that the agency launched in March.

The \$750 isn't the only disaster relief FEMA will provide, which some falsely claimed. Disaster-affected people can receive FEMA assistance to cover a variety of expenses - including medical or dental care, funerals and immediate housing - up to a cap of \$42,500.

FEMA has approved nearly \$60 million in housing and other assistance for over 51,000 North Carolinans thus far, according to its website.

OFFICIALS TRY HUMOR, REDDIT TO CURB MISINFORMATION

U.S. Rep. Chuck Edwards is the latest lawmaker to push back against what he called "outrageous rumors that have been circulated online" about Helene.

Edwards in a Tuesday statement responded to a litany of false claims about the storm and urged people to factcheck what they see online with a credible source.

The congressman on Monday poked fun at the debunked claim that FEMA is blocking access to Starlink satellites, which are being used to provide internet to Western North Carolina amid infrastructure outages. In a photo shared on X, he appeared to wrestle a Starlink box from a grinning FEMA worker.

"Not sure if you can tell, but the Starlinks have made it to WNC safe and sound. Couldn't confiscate one if I tried... and I tried," Edwards wrote in part.

The White House launched a new strategy to share Helene recovery updates and combat misinformation: Reddit. Though its account was created in 2021, it's now active. It posted Wednesday on the r/NorthCarolina subreddit with information on FEMA's work and how to connect with disaster relief.

Our Chantal Allam and Josh Shaffer alongside the Charlotte Observer's Joe Marusak investigated and fact-checked Helene misinformation. We'll keep updating that list. If you see a Helene or #ncpol rumor you'd like us to check out, email realitycheck@newsobserver.com.

WHAT ELSE WE'RE WORKING ON

The North Carolina treasurer candidates debated Tuesday night in Greensboro, where Republican Brad Briner and Democrat Wesley Harris each laid out their vision on how to remedy a forecasted strain on the State Health Plan and manage the state's pension plan and investments. Luciana Perez Uribe Guinassi has the details. Democrats are vying for 14 key seats in the state legislature this election to disrupt the current Republican supermajority. The Charlotte Observer's Rebecca Noel unpacks the public education issues Democrats say are at stake.

CAMPAIGN WATCH

Vice President Kamala Harris will campaign in Greenville on Sunday, reports Danielle Battaglia. The visit will be her 19th trip to the state this election cycle.

VOTER GUIDE

In the latest candidate questionnaires from our 2024 NC Voter Guide, see what candidates for U.S. House District 4 have to say about the issues, and learn more about their biographies.

Two candidates answered our questions:

Republican Eric Blankenburg

Democrat Valerie Foushee.

Today's newsletter was by Emily Vespa with contributions from Danielle Battaglia. Check your inbox tomorrow for more #ncpol.

You can sign up to receive the Under the Dome newsletter at newsobserver.com/newsletters. Want your friends to get our email, too? Forward them this newsletter so they can sign up. We want to know what you would like to see in the Under the Dome newsletter. Do you like highlights from the legislature? Political analysis? Do you have a question you'd like The News & Observer team to answer? Tell us here. You can also email us at dome@newsobserver.comDon't forget to follow our tweets and listen to our Under the Dome podcast for more developments.

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JD Vance addresses Helene aid, immigration at NC town hall in final sprint to Election Day

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC)
Author: Luciana Perez Uribe Guinassi and Caitlyn Yaede, correspondent, News & Observer Section: election | 1380 Words
OpenURL Link

Republican vice presidential candidate JD Vance has been no stranger to North Carolina in the past few months.

And on Thursday, just 25 days from the election, Vance sat on an armchair across from moderator Danica Patrick - a former professional race car driver and Trump supporter - and took questions from the public during a town hall at the Koury Convention Center in Greensboro.

In a wide-ranging discussion, he addressed Hurricane Helene recovery, immigration and Social Security.

North Carolina is a battleground state and will play a pivotal role in determining who wins the presidential election this November. About 500 to 600 people were gathered at the convention center.

One person asked Vance whether he and former President Donald Trump promised "not to forget Western North Carolina" and, when a "legitimate conversation" could be had about "overhauling the process of disaster relief in the United States," to cut bureaucratic red tape.

"We're never going to let the people of that region of our country - the region really built our country," Vance replied. "We're never going to let them be left behind and forgotten."

Vance is a U.S. senator from Ohio but before that, he was known for "Hillbilly Elegy," a memoir where he writes about growing up in Appalachian Ohio.

"I think once we get past" the recovery phase, "then it's time to focus on the disastrous federal response to this incredible crisis," Vance said.

Trump has spread conspiracy theories on social media, including one that falsely claimed the Biden administration has used disaster relief funds for people in the country without legal authorization. And in Trump's first trip to North Carolina since it was hit by Helene, he said the federal government's response to the devastating storm had been "terrible."

Over the past week, Trump and President Joe Biden's teams have criticized each other's past and current disaster relief efforts. The news release announcing Vance's town hall said Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee for president, "completely left North Carolinians behind in the wake of devastation post-Hurricane Helene."

Federal, state and local responders have been working in Western North Carolina. And on Wednesday, state lawmakers passed a bill providing \$273 million for relief efforts. Legislative leaders have described this as a "first step."

Robert McKenzie, who had traveled from Cumberland County to see Vance for the first time, said before the town hall that "all the things that Trump and Vance stand for are important to us."

"Recovering from this last disaster - that is the most important thing for North Carolina," he said.

As for relief efforts, he said: "The actual civilians in North Carolina are doing more than the government."

Questions on immigration

Vance took a question asking for his and Trump's plan to manage illegal immigration. Vance said they planned to deport people in the country without authorization who had committed crimes.

"The plan, to put it simply, is we gotta send them home. We gotta send them home ASAP," he said.

Prior to Vance speaking, Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Whatley and U.S. Sen. Ted Budd of North Carolina gave brief remarks.

Vance also honed in on the fiscal impact of immigrants living in the United States without legal authorization and blamed undocumented individuals for the high cost of housing.

"The young generation in this country, they're growing up in a nation where they're going to become paupers in the country that their parents and their grandparents built," Vance said. "The American dream of home-ownership: not being deep in credit card debt, I want you to own a piece of the future and not just be a permanent debtor to people and institutions that don't care about you."

Home prices shot up during the pandemic and have remained high. Economists who spoke with Forbes said mortgage rates - which have been dropping recently - need to remain low and inventory needs to grow for prices to drop.

A woman asked Vance to clarify Trump and Vance's plan for Social Security.

Trump "is going to protect Social Security and he is going to cut taxes on Social Security income," Vance said. He then once more shifted to immigration, saying that "illegal aliens" would "bankrupt" the program.

Social Security benefits are for citizens with only some noncitizens, such as green card holders and refugees, allowed to access these benefits.

Vance criticized Harris's response in a recent interview on ABC's "The View," where she said "not a thing" came to mind after being asked whether she would have done anything differently than Biden over the past four years.

Vance's last visit came soon after Mark Robinson scandal

Vance is set to return to North Carolina Sunday with an appearance at the NASCAR race at the Charlotte Motor Speedway, the Charlotte Business Journal reported.

Before Thursday, he last visited North Carolina at a stop in Charlotte in late September. That visit came after CNN reported that North Carolina's GOP gubernatorial candidate, Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson, allegedly made a series of sexually graphic, racist, homophobic and antisemitic posts on a pornographic message board about a decade ago.

In Charlotte, Vance was asked about the Trump campaign's past support of Robinson. Vance said what Robinson "said or didn't say is ultimately between him and the people of North Carolina," The Charlotte Observer reported. Trump has previously endorsed Robinson.

Greensboro is Robinson's hometown. Vance did not mention Robinson on Thursday.

Voter concerns

Multiple people waiting to enter the Town Hall told The News & Observer they have Hurricane Helene at the top of their minds.

Penny Godfrey from Davidson County said Hurricane Helene had damaged two of her cars and her driveway, and a tree had fallen.

"That \$750 will sure help pay for that," she said, referring to the \$750 that the Federal Emergency Management Agency makes available, and that does not need to be repaid, for disaster survivors to cover immediate costs like food and water. FEMA also provides up to \$42,500 for other needs.

Lisa Rancer, from Guilford County, said it's "very important for money to be available for people in Western North Carolina to receive aid instead of giving that aid to illegal immigrants."

"Having that FEMA money available for our own people," she said.

Others were concerned about the economy. Brendan Sheet, who relocated from Fort Worth, Texas, to Winston-Salem, said it was his first campaign event.

"I would like to see prices level out to where we can afford to live and not be slaves to money. It's like we work harder and have combined incomes, but are poorer than we've ever been," he said.

Unemployment remains low in the United States. But the purchasing power of a dollar has dropped by 23% between September 2019 and September 2024.

Rachel Withers said she was "broke." Withers was with her two daughters, who are homeschooled by Godfrey. She said this event was part of her daughter's civic education.

"My paycheck is worth 40% less than it used to be. I make one-third more than I did in 2020. I had savings in 2020." said Withers, who is from Mooresville.

"In 2024, I have \$40,000 in credit card debt," she said, citing data that shows that American credit card debt is the highest it's ever been.

Democrats speak on Trump's record responding to disasters

Ahead of Vance's visit, Democrats held a virtual press conference to "call out Trump's record of denying disaster aid to North Carolina and playing politics with disaster relief," and Trump, Vance and Robinson's "extreme Project 2025 agenda to gut future disaster relief and preparation," according to a news release sent out by Democrats.

Project 2025 is a political initiative created by conservative think tank the Heritage Foundation. Democrats have said Trump and the GOP are behind the plan, and many of Trump's former staff reportedly helped create it, but Trump has denied involvement.

"As President, Donald Trump cut \$155 million from FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund, and denied North Carolina over \$900 million in requested disaster aid after Hurricane Matthew struck our state," said U.S. Rep. Kathy Manning, according to the news release.

The \$155 million number appears to be referring to the Trump administration's intention to transfer \$155 million from FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund to pay for transportation for adult migrants between detention centers and courtrooms.

As for the denied funds, the Trump administration initially denied most of a request for federal funds to respond to Hurricane Matthew in 2017, but later approved more aid.

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NC facility for migrant children freed up for FEMA's use in Helene relief

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Danielle Battaglia, News & Observer | Section: politics government | 455 Words OpenURL Link

A facility in Greensboro intended to be used to house unaccompanied migrant children will instead be made available to help with hurricane relief.

Sen. Thom Tillis and Rep. Richard Hudson led the nine Republican members of the North Carolina congressional delegation in asking the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to sign over a care facility in Greensboro to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

On Wednesday, FEMA announced that transfer is taking place.

"This already controversial migrant facility has gone unused for years, which is why Rep. Hudson and I have been pushing the Biden administration to use it instead for Helene recovery efforts," Tillis said in a written statement to McClatchy on Wednesday. "I'm glad they've listened and this facility can now be put to better use by helping North Carolinians in their moment of need."

The facility in northwest Greensboro sits on 100 acres of what used to be the American Hebrew Academy. The school closed in 2019 after 18 years as an international boarding school.

Officials with the Department of Health and Human Services leased the facility to use for unaccompanied migrants who crossed the southern border.

Lawmakers like Tillis and Hudson questioned HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra on how he planned to keep both the community and the children housed there safe. These types of facilities have a long history of abuse allegations. Without definitive answers from Becerra or other HHS employees, Tillis and Hudson have loudly spoken out against the facility's use.

Despite that, the facility became operational to house minors in March.

But that never happened.

On June 23, HHS announced it was ramping down its operation of facility upkeep, though it would have to be ready within eight weeks of being notified that children would need to be housed there. It remains under that classification.

Tillis and Hudson reminded HHS of this when they asked the agency to transfer the facility to FEMA for use.

In a letter to Becerra and FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell, the lawmakers noted that the Greensboro facility has hundreds of beds and facilities for medical care, meals and education. It was created to hold up to 1,100 beds if needed.

"We believe that this ICF (Influx Care Facility) could be repurposed to support the state's rescue and recovery efforts," the letter stated.

They suggested using the facility for the thousands of people displaced by the storm, or as a staging area for aid workers.

The letter was signed by Sen. Ted Budd and Reps. Chuck Edwards, Virginia Foxx, Patrick McHenry, Greg Murphy,

David Rouzer and Dan Bishop.

In a written statement, a FEMA spokesperson said transferring the Greensboro facility to FEMA is part of a "comprehensive, whole-of-government approach" to help those affected by the storm.

Under The Dome embed (2022)

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No, disaster funding isn't being sent to the border. Here's how FEMA spends its money

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Emily Vespa, correspondent, News & Observer | Section: politics government | 1077 Words OpenURL Link

After the Homeland Security secretary last week warned that the Federal Emergency Management Agency can meet immediate needs but is short of funding to make it through hurricane season, false claims about the agency's spending are proliferating.

Some allege that the projected shortfall means Helene survivors won't get the help they need, wrongly blaming agency spending on migrant services for draining disaster relief funds.

Here's how FEMA is spending disaster funds - and how it isn't.

Helene fact check: Here are the rumors and the reality in Western North Carolina

Migrant services

Both former President Donald Trump and Elon Musk have peddled a claim that FEMA emptied its account to "import voters." The unsubstantiated conspiracy theory that Democrats allow people to cross the border illegally and then register them to vote is one that Trump and Musk echo often, despite evidence that noncitizen voting is extremely rare.

"The GREAT people of North Carolina are being stood up by Harris and Biden, who are giving almost all of the FEMA money to Illegal Migrants in what is now considered to be the WORST rescue operation in the history of the U.S.," Trump wrote on Truth Social Monday.

In truth, FEMA did not divert disaster relief funds to people who are living in the country without legal authorization. And it has enough money for immediate disaster relief, the agency says.

Some Trump supporters amplifying this claim are alluding to a migrant services program funded by Customs and Border Protection money at Congress' direction. FEMA distributed about \$650 million last fiscal year under the program to support communities that are receiving migrants and relieve overcrowding in temporary shelters.

Others, like right-wing X user Libs of TikTok, are referring to a FEMA program that helps provide food and shelter to those in need. Congress previously appropriated funds under the program to a now-defunct arm that provided humanitarian relief for migrants, which was replaced by the CBP-funded program.

FEMA's disaster fund, which supports federal disaster relief, is a separate spigot. There are stringent spending terms for the fund, which Congress replenishes through appropriations. It's most often used to provide federal assistance after the president declares a major disaster.

Though those migrant programs don't spend disaster relief funds, the Trump administration in 2019 told Congress it was taking \$155 million from the disaster fund to give to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Washington Post reported.

COVID-19

Libs of TikTok also ignited fury over FEMA's COVID-19 assistance, which is doled out from the disaster relief fund.

"Billions of dollars are being spent on a pandemic that's been over for years while Helene victims are struggling,"

the post read. "See for yourself where the priorities lie in Kamala's America."

Trump first authorized the use of the disaster fund for COVID-19 relief in an unprecedented move in March 2020. It was the first time the fund was used for simultaneous disaster assistance nationwide. When President Joe Biden took office, he expanded the pandemic relief.

FEMA has promised nearly \$15 billion in disaster relief funds for COVID-19 assistance in the past fiscal year, including \$491 million to North Carolina, according to its latest report. That's because it's still reimbursing states, territories and tribes for pandemic-related costs, like vaccination and testing services. It's also still covering COVID-19-related funerals. The deadline to incur all COVID-19 costs is in 2026.

A Government Accountability Office analysis found that FEMA underestimated pandemic-related costs. It's taking FEMA years to review and reimburse COVID-19 expenses because the agency faced a slew of requests from across the country during the pandemic, the GAO said.

Armed guards

This week, FEMA posted a contract opportunity for private, armed security guards as part of its disaster response in North Carolina, which sparked outrage on X.

"If they were helping people as well as they could, the people themselves would protect FEMA," one user posted.

The FEMA posting says the agency uses armed guards to "safeguard federal employees, visitors, and property at both temporary and fixed facilities during disaster and emergency declarations." The contract will likely be between \$5 and \$10 million.

North Carolina isn't the only state where FEMA's hiring armed guards: It also recently posted similar contract opportunities in Iowa, Texas, Connecticut and South Carolina.

Helene survivors

FEMA is providing a one-time payment of \$750 to households impacted by Helene to help survivors cover immediate costs like food, water and hygiene items while they apply for more assistance. It's a new grant that the agency launched in March.

The \$750 is not a loan, an agency official said on X in response to a user that said survivors had to repay it or "the feds can seize their property."

"This is not true," wrote FEMA spokesperson Jaclyn Rothenberg. "We do not ask for this money back."

That's the case for most FEMA grants, notwithstanding agency assistance for costs later covered by insurance, which must be paid back. The Small Business Administration, a different federal agency, offers disaster loans.

The \$750 isn't the only disaster relief FEMA will provide, contrary to some claims.

Disaster-affected people can receive FEMA assistance to cover a variety of expenses up to a cap of \$42,500, including:

Immediate housing for the displacedHome and property repair or replacementDisaster-related medical or dental care FuneralsChild care

The maximum of \$42,500 doesn't include assistance for rental housing in the 18 months after a disaster or expenses for people with disabilities.

FEMA has approved nearly \$70 million in housing and other assistance for over 57,000 North Carolinians thus far, according to its website. The deadline to apply is Nov. 27.

What happens when disaster relief funds run low?

North Carolina's House speaker, Tim Moore, said the federal government will bear the brunt of storm relief costs, The News & Observer previously reported. Congress passed a stopgap spending bill last month to temporarily alleviate the budget shortfall through the end of the year, which shook loose about \$20 billion in disaster relief funds.

President Joe Biden last week asked lawmakers for more disaster relief funding. Rep. Chuck Edwards, who represents North Carolina's 11th Congressional District, said it's coming.

"I'm confident that supplemental disaster relief funding, which I am already involved in the process of creating, will be considered in the House once we return to session in mid-November," Edwards said in a news release.

Scant funding forces FEMA to limit nonurgent relief efforts. When restrictions are in place, the fund is still available for critical needs and housing assistance. It also still can provide grants to cover lifesaving and life-sustaining community expenses, like debris clearing or road repairs.

FEMA last imposed nonurgent relief restrictions in August, which it lifted after Congress passed the September stopgap.

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Tampa Bay Lightning home opener vs. Carolina Hurricanes postponed amid Milton recovery

October 10, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Staff Report, News & Observer | Section: carolina hurricanes | 330 Words OpenURL Link

The Carolina Hurricanes will open their 2024-25 NHL season at home Friday against the Tampa Bay Lightning, but the second game of what was supposed to be a home-and-home opening weekend has been postponed.

According to the NHL, Saturday's scheduled game at Amalie Arena in Tampa "has been postponed amid recovery efforts from the impact of Hurricane Milton."

A makeup date will be announced as soon as it can be confirmed, the NHL said in a news release.

The Tampa Bay region of Florida was particularly hard hit this week when Hurricane Milton, which reached Category 5 status over open water, made landfall as a Category 3 storm, ripping across the Florida peninsula.

Residents and officials were still assessing the damage throughout the region Thursday, but Milton's storm surge struck low-lying areas in and around Tampa and St. Petersburg hard Wednesday into Thursday. This latest storm came on the heels of Hurricane Helene's impact just two weeks earlier in the same region.

The Lightning left Florida for Raleigh on Monday, canceling a final preseason game against Nashville. The team is staying in Chapel Hill after some hastily made reservations, and practiced Tuesday at Invisalign Arena in Morrisville.

The players were allowed to bring their families and pets with them to North Carolina, Lightning general manager Julien BriseBois said Tuesday. All of the staffers also made the extended trip, he said.

"It's unfortunate what's going on, right, but what I see out of the guys is it's a burden being disrupted in what we're doing but we have the ability to bring our families and loved ones and pets with us," Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper said Tuesday. "There is a bigger picture, as I told our guys. We got to get away. There are a lot of people at home who haven't been able to get away, so a lot of our thoughts are that hopefully everybody is going to be OK and what can we do when we get back to help everybody out."

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Burke County launches Helene dashboard; sheriff warns of scams in aftermath of storm

October 10, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: Sharon McBrayer | Section: Government Politics | 701 Words OpenURL Link

In Burke County, 251 buildings had major damage after Hurricane Helene hit the area as a tropical storm on Sept. 27.

Another 34 buildings were destroyed, according to a new Burke County damage assessment dashboard. One hundred and fifty-three homes had minor damage and 31 were mildly affected.

The majority of damaged buildings were in Morganton. Eight buildings were destroyed in town. Near Glen Alpine, a row of 10 homes was destroyed along Powerhouse Road, according to the dashboard.

The data was collected by 10 teams throughout the county, according to the county.

Burke County announced the damage dashboard and a Hurricane Helene informational page at a press conference on Wednesday. The page, www.burkenc.org/2600/Hurricane-Helene, has information about private wells and FEMA help.

During the press conference, Burke County, Morganton, Drexel and Valdese officials updated residents about the impact of Hurricane Helene damage and thanked people who worked to get the area back to a semblance of normal.

"I'm incredibly proud of our team and how they responded from the time the board of commissioners issued an emergency declaration up until now," said Scott Mulwee, vice chairman of the Burke County Board of Commissioners. "They all worked tirelessly, selflessly and with an abundance of courage and compassion throughout this event. We owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude.

"I also want to commend our community for its resilience throughout this event, and for the generosity of individuals, civic and faith organizations and our local business community. It's been amazing."

County Manager Brian Epley said there is still only one confirmed death caused by the storm, which involved a vehicle accident with a downed tree where there was heavy damage.

Epley said during the storm the county 911 center was inundated with 4,300 calls and at one point, the 911 system went down but the backup system worked as designed. About 300 calls during that time were rerouted to Catawba County's 911 system, he said.

From 48 to 72 hours after the storm, 75 swift-water calls were made to homes and bridges. Epley said there were 330 wellness checks conducted, administering and deploying supplies like oxygen to high-risk citizens, insulin and a variety of other medications.

Epley said FEMA is in Burke County handling two functions of the agency. One is for individual assistance for homeowners and the other is for assistance for local governments.

Epley said agents called disaster survival associates will go door to door to those who have suffered damages due to the storm.

"So if you are on this map (of damaged homes), or you've met someone who's indicated you have damage, these folks will come to you and start that process of the application to see how they can help," Epley said.

He said the agency is evaluating Burke County for a regional FEMA Disaster Recovery Center, where FEMA associates would set up a shop to help people in person.

Epley said the county is also working with FEMA on debris removal, reminding folks to put their debris on the curb and sort it.

In a move toward a more long-term strategy, the county has identified the nonprofit Community Foundation of Burke County to accept monetary donations from those who still want to donate. Epley said the initial donation was more than \$100,000. Epley said all money donated to that fund stays in Burke County for disaster relief efforts.

The Community Foundation will make grants to nonprofits to help support housing, food and economic insecurities of residents due to the storm, Epley said.

Debris, scams in storm wake

Burke County Emergency Management Director Mike Willis asked residents to be patient with debris removal because it will take time. He said that long-term recovery from the storm will take years.

Willis said the storm will change emergency management in the state and its response to future events.

Burke County Sheriff Banks Hinceman warned about scams during this time. He said if someone shows up at a property offering to do work, residents can call the sheriff's department for a deputy to verify whether the person or group is legitimate.

"Don't trust people that just show up at your house," Hinceman said.

Hinceman said his department has had more calls from people suffering from mental health issues. He requested that people reach out to health professionals for help with mental health issues.

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Helene cast a pall over the Blue Ridge Mountains

October 10, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: News | 744 Words OpenURL Link

CAMDEN, S.C. — "Chill" is the word that comes to mind when thinking of Asheville, North Carolina, the center of Hurricane Helene's devastation last week. A hub for musicians, artists, writers, chefs, animal lovers and entrepreneurs nestled among the Blue Ridge Mountains at a temperate 2,134-foot elevation, Asheville today is bordering on a nervous breakdown.

So is the South east, generally. For generations, the Blue Ridge Mountains have provided a summer refuge for people from all around the Deep South. My family has been among the fortunate who could escape to higher climes during insufferably hot and humid summers. Mornings there were often cool enough to justify building a fire.

It seems almost everyone knows someone who lives in "the mountains," and nearly everybody else spends time there. We expect hurricanes and tropical storms to visit our coastline and Lowcountry, but who could have imagined that one could become a threat to towns hundreds of miles from the ocean?

Helene was a tropical storm by the time it reached the Carolinas, but it was still so big and so powerful that its lashing rain and winds reached South Carolina's Midlands, and people across the region are feeling the storm's pain.

When Mark Edens, a friend and part owner of a popular antiques store here in Camden, saw me the day after the storm, he skipped any greeting and went right to, "How bad are you hurting?" His despair was palpable. "You know, I physically live here," he said, "but my soul lives in the mountains. It was just too much. It broke me."

"Soul" is another word that fits the Blue Ridge. Something about the mountains nourishes the soul. It's the cooler air as you climb higher with each turn of the road. It's also the aroma of millions of trees that remind you of Christmas. Some might say when you're in the mountains, you're closer to the angels.

Asheville's fortunate location at the junction of two rivers, the French Broad and the Swannanoa, proved to be its undoing when Helene blew through and the waters rose to depths of massive destruction.

If there were an apocalyptic film named "Helene," the soundtrack would have to be Rhiannon Giddens's "Swannanoa Tunnel." The song, sometimes called "Asheville Junction," was first sung in the late 19th century to the sound of hammers pounding steel. It tells the story of the railroad tracks built by wrongfully imprisoned Black people who were labor for the Western North Carolina Railroad.

Towns along that rail line, including Swannanoa, Black Mountain, Ridgecrest and Old Fort, were almost completely destroyed by the storm. In Asheville, little was spared — certainly not the River Arts District, a mile-long oasis for artists and collectors that includes galleries for 240 artists and 23 converted warehouses offering art, food, music, breweries and what's understood as the Asheville vibe. Artsy, laidback, cool and dog-friendly, it's a flannel-and-flip-flops mecca for hikers, mountain bikers, foodies and culture connoisseurs.

One of my favorite haunts was the Marquee, a 50,000-square-foot emporium of fantasy and over-the-top sensory stimulation. Architectural elements, paintings, vintage furniture, jewelry, clothing, olive oil — it's all there. Or was.

In the immediate wake of the storm, the Asheville vibe was fully engaged, as neighbors and strangers helped one another by any means available. My son, John, who lives in Asheville, saw people going out of their way to share what others needed. But the novelty of shared catastrophe cannot last forever.

"A week later, now that so many have cleared out, the neighbors-helping-neighbors vibe has subsided somewhat," he texted me, "and it just feels like one of the bleakest places I've ever been." I asked him what the area smells like, because the mountains usually smell so fresh and clean.

"Mildew," he said. "It's not so much the smell as the ambiance. It feels like a bomb went off . Very empty and quiet, except for the occasional siren or helicopter every 20 minutes or so." Businesses are closed, except the odd gas station or grocery store with lines outside. Many people are going without power and water.

It's hard to imagine how long it will take for the Blue Ridge to recover and rebuild. At least the birds are singing, John tells me. And the bears, who had been displaced by overdevelopment, are back to wandering the neighborhoods and downtown. John saw one walking down his street Thursday morning, probably scouting abandoned houses for leftovers.

Chill, it seems, isn't just for people. Let's hope it lasts.

Parker writes for The Washington Post.

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Elections officials working to help voters impacted by storm; One Burke precinct damaged

October 10, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: Sharon McBrayer| Section: Elections | 900 Words OpenURL Link

With early voting for the November election starting next week and multiple counties in western North Carolina still reeling from the effects of Hurricane Helene, election officials are working to make sure people get to vote.

In Burke County, one Election Day precinct was damaged in the storm, while McDowell County will not hold early voting in Old Fort because the early voting site there is unsafe after damage from the storm.

On Monday, the North Carolina State Board of Elections approved a resolution to exercise emergency powers in 13 counties affected by the storm to conduct an election. McDowell County is one of the 13 counties. The other counties are Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson, Madison, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania, Watauga and Yancey.

The state elections board said infrastructure for elections administration and voters' accessibility to polling places and mail service in those counties remain severely disrupted as a result of the storm and will continue to be disrupted throughout the election.

The resolution gives those counties the ability to establish Election Day precincts in other counties, potentially in a neighboring county. Those counties can also establish more than one voting location in a precinct.

The resolution allows local boards of elections to make other changes for the general election, including reassigning poll workers to other locations, appointing emergency Election Day assistants and appointing registered voters of other counties to be election officials for early voting and Election Day voting sites.

The state board said the storm forced some voters to relocate to other parts of the state or outside the state, which will increase demand for absentee voting among voters who are not used to voting that way.

Voting absentee after Hurricane Helene

Kenny Rhyne, director of elections for Burke County, said voters living in those 13 counties who have been displaced by the storm can drop off absentee-by-mail ballots to any board of elections office in the state. That board of elections office will be responsible for time-stamping it and getting it to the voter's home board of elections before deadline on Election Day, he said.

Rhyne said he had someone come into his office from Buncombe County but is staying in Burke County who wanted to vote in Burke. Because the person hadn't lived in Burke County for 30 days, the person couldn't vote in Burke but Rhyne helped the voter request a mail-in-ballot from Buncombe. The deadline to request an absentee ballot is Oct. 29.

If someone, for instance, is from Caldwell County but is living in Burke because of the storm, and it hasn't been more than 30 days, they will need to vote at their regular precinct in their home county on Election Day. Or go to an early voting site in their home county, Rhyne said.

The same is true for someone who was living in Morganton but was displaced by the storm and is living at another address in the county. If it has been less than 30 days, the voter will need to return to their regular precinct to vote on Election Day, Rhyne said.

People can register to vote or update voter registration before the election until 5 p.m. on Friday. People also can register and vote during early voting.

People can register to vote online or in person at the DMV. People living in Burke County also can register at the Burke County Board of Elections, located at 2128 S. Sterling St., Morganton.

Those living in McDowell County can register at the McDowell County Board of Elections, located at 2458 N.C. Hwy. 226 S., Marion.

McDowell County Board of Elections has made the decision to eliminate the early voting site in Old Fort due to the damage suffered in the town, according to Deputy Director Jane Dale. Dale said the county emergency manager said it was not safe to vote at the Old Fort site, which was the Old Fort Depot.

Early voting will be held at the McDowell County Board of Elections office, located at located at 2458 N.C. Hwy. 226 S., Marion.

Early voting starts Thursday, Oct. 17, and ends Saturday, Nov. 2.

Early voting sites in Burke County are:

Burke County Elections Office, located at 2128 S Sterling St., Morganton.Glen Alpine Town Hall, located at 103 Pitt St., Glen AlpineBurke County Senior Center, located at 501 N Green St., Morganton.Rutherford College Town Hall, located at 980 Malcolm Blvd., Connelly SpringsEast Burke Senior Center Library, located at 101 Main Avenue West, Hildebran.

In Burke County, early voting weekday hours are from 8 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., and Saturday hours from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. There will be three Saturdays during the early voting period.

New voting precincts in Burke County

Kenny Rhyne, director of elections for Burke County, said there is one precinct, Upper Creek at Smyrna Baptist Church, that suffered damage during the storm. He said the board of elections is trying to figure out whether that precinct will have to move to another location.

Other Election Day precinct locations that have changed are:

Icard 1 has permanently moved from Friendship Methodist to Ray Childers Elementary. Lovelady 1 has permanently moved from the Old Rock School to Valdese Elementary School. Quaker Meadows 2 has permanently moved from the Burke County Fairgrounds to Faith Presbyterian Church. Lovelady 4 has temporarily moved from Valdese Town Hall to the Valdese Park and Rec Splash Pad due to temporary housing of the police department at the town hall.

To see other information on the election and impacts from Hurricane Helene, visit ncsbe.gov/Helene.

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Boone begins to dig out

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BOONE — Little by little, one shovel and armful of debris at a time, stunned residents and business owners continued Monday the arduous, heartbreaking task of digging out from the devastation left by Tropical Storm Helene.

Some, such as James Simmons, the owner of the Penn Station East Coast Sandwich Shop on U.S. 321, knew what had happened and what it was going to take to rebuild.

"I was in the store the whole time," he said of the worst of the flooding. "If I had any idea, I wouldn't have stayed. I would have jumped ship."

Others knew what likely had happened but didn't realize the extent of the damage until they saw it for the first time Monday morning.

"I don't think a lot of people understand how widespread this is," said Dan Stewart, the owner of the Dolbier Floor Care and Restoration company.

Helene dumped more than a foot of rain in some parts of the North Carolina mountains in a few hours Friday. Rainfall estimates in some areas topped more than 2 feet since last week.

Flash flooding and swollen creeks and rivers killed at least 60 in NC, some who drowned and others crushed by falling trees. The overall death toll across the U.S. Southeast has reached at least 121 people across six states.

More than 200,000 lost power and water service in the state. Tens of thousands were cut off from loved ones by flood waters, downed trees and roadways completely washed away.

In and around Boone, surrounding communities in Ashe, Avery and Alleghany counties were still trying to get out.

Heavy-duty trucks hauling skid-steers, tractors and backhoes moved up U.S. 421 and 321 alongside electric company crews from all over the United States.

Churches and students from Appalachian State University — those who remained behind — stepped in to help whenever possible.

"We had kids from App who belong to our church walk over this morning to see what they could do," said Pastor John Mark Brown of the Brushy Mountain Baptist Church just outside town limits. "God does things for us even through the hardest times."

While Brown spoke — he was assembling a brand new generator pump to try and move standing water — two men, random strangers from Concord, pulled in.

"Could you use a skid steer?" Chuck Griffin asked the pastor. "We got one down the road. We'll bring it up to you." A few minutes later, Griffin explained that he and a few coworkers loaded the heavy earth mover up and drove to Boone knowing that people could use help.

That was evident all over town Monday. Traffic lights, electric service and water appeared to have been restored to a lot of the town by mid-morning.

A water distribution center had been set up at Watauga County High School and Samaritan's Ministries set up a large tent filled with oxygen machines so people who require assistance breathing would have somewhere to go if they lost power.

"The support from the community has been amazing," Stewart said. "I'm thankful for the safety of our people.

"But the news, for the next week or two, will not be as nice. We're going to see the ugly side of it."

Simmons, while stranded in his store, saw some of the ugliness firsthand — first from what Mother Nature had wrought and then from mankind.

Storm water, he said, rapidly filled a creek branched off from the Watauga River nearby.

It quickly flooded the parking lot, pooled in low spots and created eddies and a swift current capable of moving large objects.

Indeed, the water swept an industrial dumpster behind his restaurant into the creek and smashed it against the concrete supports supporting a bridge on US 321.

A few minutes later, a shipping container the size of a railroad car floated into his parking lot from a Wal-Mart at least 100 yards away.

"See the scrapes there?" he said, pointing to gouges in the metal a foot from its top. "It crashed into my building. I'm lucky it only hit the corner."

At one point during the night Friday, Simmons said he watched something more sinister: Several people smashed the lock off the container to rifle through its contents like scavenging hyenas.

And despite — or perhaps because of — witnessing firsthand the craven opportunism of common thieves, he nonetheless considered himself fortunate.

"We're blessed," he said. "A lot of people lost homes or loved ones. This can be fixed. People can't (be replaced)."

Stewart echoed that sentiment. One of his sons, he said, was trapped in his Avery County home for the better part of the day Saturday, caught behind a road filled with broken trees and downed power lines.

It took several hours and a small army of men with chainsaws to cut a way through.

"It's closer when it's personal family, " he said.

Further down in a small strip of shops and offices tucked into one of Boone's main commercial arteries, State Farm agent Adam Jackson set up a pair of laptops and phone chargers under a red popup tent.

Jackson, despite having to move sodden carpet and furniture from his own office, knew he had to find a way to answer calls from distressed homeowners that he knew would occupy the coming days and weeks ahead.

"I want to be helping other people as fast as I can," he said. "I have to fix myself a little before I can really do that.

"You have to put your own oxygen mask on first."

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