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Neighbors build a road, and community, in Helene's wake

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Author: Jade Jackson; USA TODAY NETWORK | Section: News | 756 Words
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ASHEVILLE — There's only one way in and one way out of the Asheville area's Eastmoor neighborhood. But after Hurricane Helene struck the area that residents refer to as an "island mountain," that route, Moffitt Road, was gone.

Eastmoor neighbors were looking at potentially weeks or months before the road could be accessed.

"There's about 105 isolated homes in the area," said resident Joe Mueller. "People rely on that 2-mile stretch of road along the Swannanoa River. Moffitt Road was knocked completely out."

Initially on the day Tropical Storm Helene struck, pushing the Swannanoa River to record flooding and wiping out the road, Mueller's only concern was the rising water in his backyard and trees down in his driveway. Neighbors came over to help him clear them.

Then their concerns grew.

"We saw a two-story home floating by us on the river," Mueller said. "A man was on the roof. He was one of our neighbors. We later learned he passed. This is one of the most beautiful areas and suddenly cadaver dogs were finding body parts."

The seriousness of the situation came into increasing focus.

"We needed to evacuate people now," Mueller said. "Plus, there's a lot of families and elderly people who needed supplies in."

Part of the Eastmoor community efforts to meet those challenges started in his driveway.

"I told the guys who came to help me to spread to the word," he said. "Let's meet at 10 o'clock at the pond house. They looked at me because the pond house was gone. ... So we met up at the gazebo."

Every morning at 10, since the disaster, Eastmoor residents have convened at the gazebo near New Cross North to share updates, supplies and support. Over 100 neighbors have brought different types of support to their corner of Asheville.

It's something that Mueller, who's been in the area for five years, said he's truly touched by.

The first subject, the day after the storm, was potentially creating another way down the side of the mountain. Residents knew of a trail at the top of the mountain starting on neighborhood street Hampton Parrish. It led down the side of the mountain to Tunnel Road, which connects to Interstate 240. But it needed to be cleared so it would be wide enough to accommodate vehicles.

It was on the property that belonged to Eastmoor resident Melinda McLaughlin. She could tell people were hesitant about asking if they could cut through her property, but at the next gazebo meeting she told them they could.

The idea was to build a mini access point from her driveway at the top of the mountain to the driveway of her neighbors, Katie and Rodney Clark, at the bottom.

Waiting for the state Department of Transportation to repair Moffit wasn't feasible, McLaughlin said.

"It wasn't a question at all if they could cut through," she said. "I know Moffitt is a secondary Asheville road so NCDOT doesn't makes it a priority."

Using gardening tools, chainsaws and even equipment that washed up in the flood, more than 60 people spent 2 1/2 days carving out the new route. Once it was completed, residents dubbed it Helene's Pass.

That was just the beginning of the community's efforts.

Since schools were closed, retired educator Holly Reiling started entertaining the Eastmoor children early in the morning before gazebo meetings.

"We have our little nature club," Reiling said. "Because kids have a place too. This is helping them process what's happened and it helps their parents do what they need to do."

And Mueller had his brother bring in a few Starlink satellite internet units so that people could have better access to the internet.

Hundreds of community members are pooling their resources to bring even more to the small community.

"There's the human spirit," McLaughlin said. "Suddenly differences in political views don't matter. Who's wealthy, who's not shrinks away and becomes invisible. What you see rise from that is truly the core of what it means to be human."

Jade Jackson is a public safety reporter for IndyStar assisting Citizen-Times, Asheville with Hurricane Helene coverage through USA Today Network. Contact her at Jade.Jackson@IndyStar. Follow her on Twitter @IAMJADEJACKSON.

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Franklin to wear helmet stickers - Football team honoring those impacted by Helene

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Franklin football will wear a special helmet sticker to honor the Western North Carolina residents who have died or lost their homes due to Tropical Storm Helene, which struck the area on Sept. 27.

The helmet sticker is round, with "WNC" at the top and the word "STRONG" in capital letters at the bottom with a black border surrounding the center of the sticker. In the middle, three mountains symbolize the WNC area.

School principal Blair King said Signs Express in Franklin made the stickers. He added that the school ordered enough for every Mountain 7 Conference team and will cover the cost. Besides Franklin, the teams that make up the conference are East Henderson, North Henderson, Pisgah, Smoky Mountain, Tuscola and West Henderson.

Franklin has also supported Western North Carolina's recovery efforts in several other ways. The volleyball team made 200 first-aid kits for emergency workers last week. On Oct. 3, the football team loaded trucks with donations to other WNC communities while other players assisted in clean-up efforts after Helene.

Homecoming week is also going on at Franklin. The school announced that each day's theme will support another Mountain 7 conference school. Students were asked to wear blue to Smoky Mountain and West Henderson, yellow on Tuesday for Tuscola, purple on Wednesday for North Henderson, green on Thursday for East Henderson and red on Friday for Pisgah for Franklin.

Zachary Huber is a high school sports reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times and Hendersonville Times-News. Email him at zhuber@gannett.com or follow him on X @zacharyahuber.

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'We definitely want to come back' - After Helene, an Asheville developer aims to keep artists in town

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ASHEVILLE – Among the studio spaces and businesses ripped apart by Tropical Storm Helene was the Marquee. The floodwaters poured into the distinct 50,000 square-foot warehouse where the works of 240 makers and creators were carried away by the French Broad.

Wearing industrial masks, gloves and boots, Catiana Bello was one of the many volunteers pulling artworks from the rubble. Among the sculptures, paintings, pottery and prints taken by the floodwaters was a stall owned by Bello's parents.

"I peeked in the doors and it just like immediately brought me a lot of grief," Bello said of walking into the Marquee.

"There's a lot of art floating around that we can't find or identify. A lot of people's livelihoods in there," Bello said.

A few days before the clean-up began, developer Eddie Dewey surveyed the RAD from a nearby ridge, navigating a drone through Helene's winds to watch as the properties he spent much of the last 10 years helping develop into Foundy Street.

The future of some buildings, and the area's destination as an artistic hub, may not be as up-in-the-air as it seems, at least not if Dewey has anything to say about it.

"We're here to rebuild where we can and where we can do something different and continue this vision of fostering, creating, cultivating community," Dewey said of the property's future in the RAD. "We want to keep the artists here."

Dewey, whose company Dewey Property Advisors manages and owns Ramp Studios, Wedge Studios and started Foundy Street — all riverfront properties that make-up a large portion of River Arts District businesses. These businesses were part of a new wave of redevelopment along the river in the mid-to-late 2010s, bringing new life to the area just a few hundred feet away from the river in the late 2010s.

Foundy Street, which Dewey started with business partner Chris Eller, has been wildly popular. According to the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, three of the top five busiest locations in the RAD in 2022 and 2023 were Wedge at Foundation, Summit Coffee and Pleb Urban Winery. Those businesses are located along Foundy Street and have significant structural damage or face a total rebuild.

A district rooted in change

Over the past 30 years, the district's colorful murals, studios, greenways and breweries have played a vital role in Asheville's rise as a bonified arts town, but the district's past is rooted in a deep history of destruction and redevelopment.

As much as the extensive flooding caused by Helene was "not expected," Dewey said it's generally known that the area has had to "wrestle" with floodwaters. In 2008, Citizen Times writer Rob Neufeld described the then bustling business district as having been covered in floodwaters during the 1916 floods before it became the industrial hub depicted in Asheville-based author Wilma Dykeman's "The French Broad."

By the early 90s, the River Arts District began to take shape as glassblowers, musicians and artists set up shop there. By 2000, beloved long-time Citizen Times reporter and editor Tony Kiss described the area as "thriving" just before the Grey Eagle's reopening off of Lyman Street.

In the 2010s, the district saw massive growth, adding a skate park along with several breweries and plans for numerous apartment complexes, as RAD artists who expressed frustration over development practices along the river they feared would one day push them out.

In 2024, the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority released statistics in February indicating just how powerful the district had become. Between 2022 and 2023, spending in the RAD increased by 30%, outpacing the 5% increase across Buncombe County, according to a study done by Zartico Location Data. The most recent tourism spending statistics indicate the industry brought in nearly $3 billion in Buncombe County throughout 2023.

The hope is that the "reincarnated" Foundy Street would be local, focus on artists and bring affordability with it, Dewey said.

"If we can get the funding to rebuild and maintain this affordable space, then that's what we are going to do," Dewey said. One building they hope to save is the formerly segregated bathhouse that was home to Summit Coffee. He also noted that the future of the properties would have to include a conversation about "the lesson that Mother Nature gave us" during Helene, meaning longer looks at sustainable development and flood planning.

Saving art, one piece at a time

Business owners on the properties also want to stay. Susan Haynes, who owns Records in the RAD alongside her husband and son, said that while their property is damaged, the store mostly survived the worst of the flooding. As soon as the water subsided her family went back to see the business. They hope to one day return to the district with fellow artists.

"We definitely want to come back," Haynes said as she cleaned her building the morning of Oct. 7. "As far as the River Arts District goes, we're mostly all that's left."

For recovery efforts at Marquee, artists just need a place that they can recover what they can of their art, volunteer Katie Hughes said. Still, many of the studios sit with artists belongings scattered through the area.

"We need a system to clean up this art down here, because there's so much of it, and I don't want it to get bulldozed away," Hughes said.

Though DPA hopes to save a few of the Foundy Street buildings, the area will need to be "reincarnated," Dewey said, meaning that whatever the future holds for the River Arts District, the physical plans are likely to change as buildings are assessed for damages. Their goal, however, has not.

"It's hard. What it looks like down the road — we don't know. We just have an overarching goal to keep it local and then keep creative," Dewey said, noting that the effort will likely need public and private investment to rebuild.

Will Hofmann is the Growth and Development Reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. Got a tip? Email him at WHofmann@citizentimes.com. Consider supporting this type of journalism with a subscription to the Citizen Times.

MORE COVERAGE

WNC listeners call into local radio station seeking solace. 2A

Search efforts continue in Swannanoa, Buncombe County. 3A

Beware of contractor fraud, charity scams after weather disasters. 3A

Asheville neighbors build a road, and community, in Helene's wake. 4A

17-year-old collects, filters creek water for neighbors. 5A

Great Smoky Mountains: Newfound Gap Road open overnight. 6A

CLEANING UP, GETTING HELP

See 7A for the latest on resources available.

TEXT UPDATES

We are staffing a text message service to bring you the latest on Helene, connect you with resources and answer any questions you have. To sign up, text "Hello" to (239) 241-6343.

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17-year-old collects, filters creek water for neighbors after Helene

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ASHEVILLE — It started off with a muddy bank, a low creek and 5-gallon buckets. Then a ladder was added, and even built in stairs for a group of kids to walk buckets of creek water up and down with.

A day after the Tropical Storm Helene struck, Carson Stubbs, 17, figured he could gather water to filter it for use. A week-and-a-half later, he and a group of other kids have made it a daily mission to give out the collected water to neighbors in need of it.

The Asheville Christian Academy student has been keeping busy since school closed. Neighbors realized they needed a source of water, both potable and non-potable.

"I just wanted to help my community," Stubbs said. "Most of the community is a lot of elderly people so I needed to kind of step up and help. We load it into their cars and and they would drive off."

A spring nearby in between two mountains that run into the neighborhood creek had plenty of it.

"The river is just nasty," Stubbs said. "This is about as pure as it gets. We are very fortunate to have this around."

The teen said he normally comes out to fish water around 9 A.M., before going back inside around 10 P.M. He sees about 20 families a day and a few men who run water all the way to every neighbor they can.

He and a group of other young people have created an ecosystem for water collection after Hurricane Helene left them without. With the help of a neighbor nearby, they have pulley system to get water from the creek out faster.

"Steve, he's like a 70 year old guy who just got up with the ladder and put it all together," Stubbs said. "He gave us all the pipe to do all this. He's been a big help through this entire project and everything."

Steve Pfiffer lives near the creek where Stubbs collects water and said he's never seen the community come together the way it has after Hurricane Helene hit. He has been living in Eastmoor for more years than Stubbs has been alive.

"When I went down there, they just had a hose and it tapered down to where there was just a little spray nozzle," Pfiffer said. "So I happened to have some conduit that was one inch in diameter. I ran that down the stream or up the creek and put a funnel on the end of it. I had about 120 feet of it and it collects the water so much better with a lot of pressure."

Seeing young people like Stubbs looking out for their fellow neighbors was encouraging, which is why he helped them out by putting up the pulley system.

"We're all coming together for a common goal," Pfiffer said. "We're just waiting for power and water."

As they collect the water, Eastmoor resident Michelle Duncan drives up to the crew.

"Trash pick up! Trash pick up at the gazebo at 3 o'clock," Michelle Duncan yells out of her car. While the kids make an effort to collect water, the entire neighborhood has been doing it's part to support each other. Duncan's been proud of seeing the young people play a part in community efforts.

"We're figuring out a way for the community to pay them," Duncan told The Citizens-Times, Asheville, "They're literally keeping us alive with this water system."

Last week, LifeStraw teams arrived in Western North Carolina to support communities devastated by Hurricane Helene.

Two days ago, the company that sells water filtration and purification devices to remove bacteria, parasites, microplastics and other contaminates from water, donated two water filters to the teen.

"That's how we're getting the drinking water now if we run out of bottled water," Stubbs said.

Most Eastmoor residents are still without running water, but Stubbs said doing him part is putting a smile on people's faces.

"I've gotten a lot of appreciation and thanks," Stubbs said. "So, it's been very cool to meet everyone and because I had no idea that half the people here existed before. It's just been a good way to meet people and help take care of their needs to."

Jade Jackson is a public safety reporter for IndyStar assisting Citizen-Times, Asheville with Hurricane Helene coverage through USA Today Network. Contact her at Jade.Jackson@IndyStar.

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WNC listeners call into local radio station seeking solace, connection

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ASHEVILLE — Trapped in the station by fallen trees, offline, with no power, no water and negligible cell phone reception, a team of local broadcasters stayed on air as Tropical Storm Helene brought flooding and devastation to Western North Carolina.

A week and a half later, they're still there, fielding nonstop phone calls from community members and trying to connect those with needs to those with the skills and resources to fill them.

It began Sept. 27, as News Director and morning show host Mark Starling rode out Tropical Storm Helene in iHeartRadio's West Asheville studio. Miles away, his wife, Brandee, was braced in a SUV with their son and four dogs at the Citgo station in Black Mountain, watching waves come over the top of the I-40 overpass. She'd been trying to get to the studio.

The couple had spoken that morning before the worst of the storm rocked WNC. That would be the last time they heard each other's voices until reuniting on air days later.

Starling has left the station only briefly in the days since the storm began, his nights spent sleeping on a blow-up mattress in the conference room. His family is now staying in Atlanta, with his wife, a mental health counselor, calling in occasionally to offer coping tips and join him in assuring listeners that "it's OK not to feel OK."

It's a big change from the music and political talk radio formats that the iHeart Asheville team followed before the storm.

"There was not an intention to turn storm coverage into what it's turned into, it naturally and organically just went that way," Starling told the Citizen Times Oct. 6.

For many, it has become a lifeline as WWNC and the six other stations owned by iHeart, based out of the West Asheville studio dubbed "Radio Ranch," simulcast coverage of the disaster. As Starling described it, the broadcast stations have turned into a rescue, relief and recovery network. People call in looking for connection, for solace, to get the word out about missing loved ones or ask for tips — like leads on heavy equipment that could help clear mud out of devastated towns.

Others call to offer free help with removing trees blocking driveway or obtaining insulin or other needed medications.

Starling repeatedly has said the iHeart team is just the conduit for a community coming together to help itself.

"I don't know that you could find a group that could mobilize and roll out as fast as Western North Carolinians can roll out and mobilize for themselves," Starling said. "It's an incredible thing to watch."

'Help is on the way'

Some callers try to help in any way they can. As the Oct. 6 morning show wound down, one named Bill said he couldn't work a chainsaw, but he could sing. He offered a few verses of "Amazing Grace" in a resonant baritone.

Starling, WWNC morning host, choking up, asked if someone who "does not have a frog in their throat" could take

over.

Co-host Eddie Foxx, of 99.9 FM Kiss Country, stepped in. Producer Tank Spencer followed up to direct a message to an earlier caller, Pat, an 82-year-old widow in East Asheville, whose home was destroyed: "Pat, if you're still listening, help is on the way. Our crew is coming out."

The station has established teams on the ground, Starling said, coordinating with a community member, Chris Henderson, who called in to say he was doing wellness checks with information he heard from callers on the radio. Henderson suggested they combine forces.

Starling said that every day, the station sends Henderson lists of people reported missing, received via email or callers, and in the last week, they've located 83 families, letting loved ones know they are safe, and helped deliver supplies or send out volunteer chainsaw crews to clear debris for people stranded in their homes.

Buncombe County also has established a Family Assistance Center to assist in finding and connecting with residents who might be missing or cannot be reached.

After the morning show Oct. 6, looking for fresh air on the studio's concrete stoop, Starling ran into listener Matthew Supley, who was bringing him a plastic bag of clean socks. In turn, Starling carried a case of bottled water out to Supley's car.

Blackout after Helene

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, after internet and cell service went down and generators kicked on to keep power going, Starling said, he and Spencer were left sitting in shock. At a loss, they went back on air, trying to cobble together information the best they could.

The next day, Starling said a friend, Andy Suhren, arrived with two ham radio transceivers in tow. From there, they tapped into the amateur radio operators network — getting information on active rescues, rising waters and as many firsthand accounts as possible.

The station relayed the information to listeners.

"It saved us and I think they saved lives," Starling said. "People heeded the warnings."

At 7:30 p.m. that Saturday, Starling saw something he described as "absolutely glorifying:" Two corporate engineers from the iHeart emergency team walking down the studio's hallway, a Starlink satellite internet unit strapped to their backs that would restore the station's online connection to the outside world.

'A place for people'

The goal of the round-the-clock broadcasts, Starling said, is to provide "a place for people."

"Their calls go through my head every day ... they stick with you," he said. "The pain that these people have endured, that we've all endured — some have endured a whole hell of a lot more than others — but we've all endured something. It's been traumatic for every single person who had to sit through this wretched storm."

Officials have described the storm as causing "biblical devastation." In Buncombe County, 72 deaths had been confirmed as of Oct. 4. The death toll in Western North Carolina had risen to at least 108 people.

When cell service blinked out and thousands were left without power and water, people turned to radio. It has not been uncommon, in the days since, to see cars with windows rolled down and doors open, radios blaring as neighbors clustered around to listen.

"I think it's really shown a lot of people who might have forgotten about radio, or maybe just didn't listen to the radio much anymore, it's shown them that there is a need in our world for it," Starling said. "Because when it came right down to it, when that storm was going on, it was the only medium that was left that was able to get people information."

Where to hear the latest information about Helene recovery

Buncombe County officials are holding news briefings each day at 4 p.m. The briefings are streamed live on thecounty's Facebook page and broadcasted on Blue Ridge Public Radio at 88.1 FM. You can also listen on the iHeart radio stations, including 99.9, 104.3 and 105.1 FM and 570 AM.

Sarah Honosky is the city government reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA TODAY Network. News Tips? Email shonosky@citizentimes.com or message on Twitter at @slhonosky. Please support local, daily journalism with a subscription to the Citizen Times.

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NewsBank inc.

Cleaning up, getting help - Resources available in Henderson County Curfew in effect

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Henderson County remains in a State of Emergency and a 10 p.m.-7 a.m. curfew is still in effect for the entire county.

Emergency teams continue to work calls and rescues across the county. Please limit travel so crews can not only work emergencies but also so Duke Energy crews can work on restoring power.

What to do with debris

Henderson County will provide free curbside storm debris pickup for all county residents on NCDOT, municipal and private roads. All storm debris that is pushed to the right of way of a property will be picked up for free.

Burning debris is not the safest method under the current conditions. We want to reduce the risk of accidental fires while emergency responders continue to work. We strongly encourage residents to use this free curbside service provided by the county to reduce the risk of accidental fires.

Apply for disaster assistance at https://www.disasterassistance.gov/.

Find a job as debris collection monitor

Debris Tech is hiring hurricane debris collection monitors to support recovery efforts in Henderson County. With immediate work available, applicants can earn $1,000 or more per week based on full-time hours.

These positions offer hourly pay, overtime eligibility and on-the-job training, with no prior experience required. Hurricane debris collection monitors will be responsible for ensuring that eligible debris is properly collected and loaded, as well as maintaining safety standards and reporting any issues during removal operations.

To apply, visit www.debrisjobs.com and check the "Debris Monitor" box or text your name, contact information, and city/county/state of residence to 407-205-9602 or 407-205-9627.

Find a place to do laundry

Express Laundry, 5839 Asheville Hwy., Hendersonville. Open 6 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Sunday. 828-551-5053.

Pocket Change Laundry, 1620 Brevard Road, Suite 50, Hendersonville. Open 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Laundry drop-off from 8 a.m.-noon at Pocket Change Laundry, 282 New Leicester Hwy., Asheville, or 1620 Brevard Road, Hendersonville. 50% off wash, dry and fold for regular customers. Free for first responders and linemen. (828) 540-2625 or www.itspocketchange.com.

Resource Hubs

Henderson County will have two Resource Hub locations from 9 a.m.-6 p.m. on Oct. 9-10 for water distribution and other supplies. The Resource Hub locations are:

Etowah Elementary, 320 Etowah School Road, Etowah

Mills River Town Hall, 124 Town Center Drive, Mills River

In addition, two churches will provide community distribution lines this week:

Ebeneezer Baptist Church, 2557 Chimney Rock Road, Hendersonville, from 10 a.m.-1 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 9, and Friday, Oct. 11.

First Baptist Church, 312 5th Ave. W., Hendersonville, from noon-4 p.m. on Thursday, Oct. 10, and 10 a.m.-2 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 12.

Donations - financial aid needed now

Donation and volunteer information: http://www.visithendersonvillenc.org/helene-relief

Sign up to volunteer at distribution center: https://signup.com/.../invitation2/secure/3613728180100/...

Henderson County is no longer in need of physical donations like water, food and supplies after an outpouring of support from the community and beyond.

Henderson County does continue to encourage financial contributions. The Community Foundation of Henderson County has set up a special page for Hurricane Relief and Recovery, and donors may choose among funds specifically for Henderson County and the surrounding area, WNC recovery and Lake Lure and Chimney Rock.

If you're interested in volunteering, the United Way of Henderson County is managing volunteers.

Wellness Check Status Map

Henderson County has launched a Wellness Check Status Map for missing contacts. This map shows individuals whose location and safety are unknown in red. Blue dots show contacts that were made. Check the map to see if you are listed or if you know the whereabouts of anyone on this map. Call (828) 771-6670 to notify of anyone's status. View the map at https://hendersoncounty.maps.arcgis.com/.../76a0a66ff2ff4...

Environmental health

Have questions about your well water, septic system or food establishment after Tropical Storm Helene? The Environmental Health team has compiled a list of guidance and resources to help people navigate their situation. Visit https://www.hendersoncountync.gov/.../environmental...

To view Hendersonville Water Department updates and a map for up-to-date status of water advisories, visit http://www.hvlnc.gov/wateralerts. Depending on where customers are in the system determines if they still need to boil water. The majority of customers have water and no longer need to boil water.

The state of North Carolina will provide free well testing kits for those affected by Tropical Storm Helene at a future date. Test kits are expected to arrive by Monday, Oct. 14. More details are forthcoming.

Government offices

City government offices in Hendersonville have reopened with walk-in services at some facilities from 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

City Hall, 160 6th Ave. E.

Hendersonville Police Department, 630 Ashe St.

Community Development, 100 King St.

Visit www.hvlnc.gov/Helene or call (828) 697-3052 for updated city service information.

FEMA assistance

President Biden has approved federal disaster assistance that is available for survivors in designated counties in North Carolina. Survivors may apply online at disasterassistance.gov, call 800-621-3362 or on the FEMA App.

Recreation

The Oklawaha Greenway in Hendersonville is open for walking.

Information call center

The call center is available for all non-medical requests for information. Call (828) 771-6670 or email Helene-info@hcem.org. For emergencies, call 911.

For more information visit www.hendersoncountync.gov and click on the Hurricane Helene Updates banner.

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Newfound Gap Road open overnight after Helene

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Author: Ryley Ober; Asheville Citizen Times | Section: News | 424 Words
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ASHEVILLE – Newfound Gap Road in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is open 24 hours a day starting Oct. 8, though this main road connecting Cherokee in North Carolina to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, will remain closed to commercial vehicles.

The National Park Service announced Oct. 8 that the park is lifting the overnight road closure of Newfound Gap Road, also known as U.S. 441. The opening is made possible through the help of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Government and Sevier County partners, "who will assist the park in turning around commercial vehicles at checkpoints on both sides of US 441/Newfound Gap Road overnight," according to the news release.

"The park continues to see an influx of illegal, large commercial vehicles attempting to travel the road — the park has turned away 173 commercial vehicles over five days," the release said.

The release reiterated that even as other major routes being closed, Newfound Gap is not safe for large, commercial vehicles.

"Newfound Gap Road is a two-lane road with steep, continuous grades and tight curves. There are no truck lanes, runaway truck ramps or places for a large commercial vehicle to slow down and pull over," the release said.

Commerical vehicles are always prohibited on this throughfare and in all areas of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park with the exception of Spur.

"Commercial vehicles will be stopped, turned around at checkpoints and may be subject to a federal misdemeanor violation notice and fine," according to the release.

Most of Great Smoky Mountains National Park is open, the release said. NPS is encouraging visitors to check current conditions in the park before visiting.

Balsam Mountain, Cataloochee, and Big Creek areas, campgrounds, and roads remain closed while park staff assess conditions and address damage after Tropical Storm Helene, according to the park website. Foothills Parkway East near Cosby and Lakeview Drive remain closed.

"Hiking and backcountry travel are not recommended in the park following Hurricane Helene impacts," the website reads.

"Park staff are assessing trail conditions and addressing damage, but unpredictable creek crossings, potential downed trees, and other hazardous trail conditions remain. Emergency response times may be delayed with staff stretched thin and resources limited."

Ryley Ober is the Public Safety Reporter for Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. She is a graduate of Indiana University and was the Citizen Times Summer News Reporting Intern in 2022. Email her at rober@gannett.com and follow her on Twitter @ryleyober

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Search efforts continue in Swannanoa, Buncombe County

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SWANNANOA – Sitting on the front porch of the home his family has lived in for 60 years, Roy Shelton watched as the Swannanoa River rose to the base of his house on a hill.

Shelton, 73, saw whole tractor trailers, brand new cars and things he "can't even say" sweep down the normally tranquil river, which turned violent by Tropical Storm Helene, which slammed into Western North Carolina Sept. 27. Eleven days later, the retired Swannanoa resident still sat on his porch as the sound of helicopters could be heard overhead and search and rescue crews were "everywhere," as he put it.

"I was born and raised here, and I never would have thought that I would see the Swannanoa River be that violent," Swannanoa Fire Chief Anthony Penland said in an Oct. 8 briefing.

Driving through water reaching the doors of their firetrucks, Swannanoa Fire and Rescue workers started rescuing residents from the rising floodwaters Sept. 27, Penland said. They blew sirens and played evacuation messages in Spanish and English over the PA system, warning of the incoming flood.

"We are still actively searching the river and the debris piles with our task force units that have been assigned to us, and we are still finding some of our citizens," Penland said. "But for those of us who were born and raised here, some of these folks are going to be our friends."

Penland mentioned a landslide in the Grovemont community, which "took two people that I knew personally." He said they are making sure "we turn over every stone" to find anyone who may be missing.

Searches and rescues continue:

no update on fatalities

The fire chief said he doesn't have an official count of Helene-related deaths in Swannanoa. When his team locates someone, they call in the Buncombe County Sheriff's Office, which then takes over, Penland said.

Buncombe County Sheriff Quentin Miller also confirmed first responders are still undergoing search and rescue operations in the county, adding that "there have been areas we haven't been able to get to." Now using helicopters and other resources, first responders are "trying to get to those areas," though Miller declined to say where those areas are.

Miller said about 150 personnel from just about every of the 100 counties in North Carolina have come to help throughout the Sheriff's Office's entire operation, from search and rescues to dispatches and day-to-day calls. One sheriff sent a helicopter to assist with rescues.

The last time Miller updated the number of fatalities in the county was in an Oct. 3 briefing, with 72 confirmed deaths. The next day, county spokesperson Lillian Govus said a local team of North Carolina State Medical Examiners was being set up, adding that "our medical examiner is suspending outgoing information about the loss of life" in Buncombe County.

"The support team is being put in place by the state, and once that team is set up and established, we will be able to provide additional updates on the number of friends, loved ones and neighbors who lost their lives in this horrific

natural disaster," Govus said Oct. 8.

In the Oct. 8 briefing, Miller differed all questions regarding loss of life to the North Carolina Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

"The medical examiner will release information as it is confirmed. The county suspended sharing that information so we can defer to the medical examiner," Govus told the Citizen Times Oct. 8.

"That local team has been set up, but any questions about loss of life should be sent to that state office."

The Citizen Times reached out to the N.C. Emergency Management and N.C. Division of Health and Human Services for an update on Helene-related deaths in Buncombe County.

A long path forward:

neighbors helping neighbors

Penland said his goal is to make sure that "our small communities" are not left out when relief and assistance starts coming in. He said FEMA has been in the community going door to door. Shelton said they came and spoke to him on his porch that day.

The fire chief described a long path forward for the small-town east of Asheville, for which they are going to need help, he said: Bridges are washed out. The roads aren't there. The road and infrastructure in Bee Tree community has to be rebuilt.

"They bring in dirt so they can have enough dirt to put the power poles back in, then to try to fix the water," Penland said.

The Bee Tree community has been "hauling for a number of days" and has a temporary way to drive there with smaller vehicles and dump trucks, he said.

"It's going to be a long time coming. If there's people out there wanting to drive around and help their neighbors ... my suggestion would be find a place to park away from all that heavy equipment and walk in and help your neighbor. That's how we are going to get through it."

From his family home, Shelton said "everybody has been helping everybody, even ones that lost everything."

Ryley Ober is the Public Safety Reporter for Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. She is a graduate of Indiana University and was the Citizen Times Summer News Reporting Intern in 2022. Email her at rober@gannett.com and follow her on Twitter @ryleyober

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Beware of contractor fraud and charity scams after weather disasters

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Author: Jade Jackson; USA TODAY NETWORK | Section: News | 1037 Words
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ASHEVILLE - Every year, hurricanes, tornadoes and other major weather events leave millions of Americans struggling to recover and rebuild their lives. Unfortunately, these events also provide an opening for dishonest contractors and scammers looking to take advantage of homeowners.

Ryan Cody with the North Carolina Licensing Board for General Contractors said that during times of disaster, unlicensed contractors from all over the country will go seeking "recovery money."

"And oftentimes they don't deliver on the services promised," Cody said. "They just take the money and leave. People have already been victimized by the storm and then these fraudulent contractors take advantage of hurricane victims. So, be wary of people coming door to door."

He reminds North Carolinians any project totaling over $40,000 from Tropical Storm Helene's damage requires a licensed North Carolina general contractor, who comes with approval from their board for being certified in working on projects with the promise of continued education and renewing their license annually.

"Never pay a big deposit up front," Cody said. "Always have a written contract. I wouldn't pay anything until they have a certificate of compliance. Make sure all changes are in writing."

Chaddrick Francis is a contractor for his own company Francis Crawlspace & Foundation Repairs LLC, based in Greenville and said one common scam he's seeing is people pretending to offer charity work for disaster victims.

"They're offering to help or say they're going to help," Francis said. "But then they turn around and ask for money. Another red flag is contractors who keep changing the work or the change order and wanting to charge you more for it. Make sure those change forms are effective and a customer signs those papers before a change is made. I talk to my customers before I change anything."

His crawl space and foundation repair business specializes in waterproofing and structural repairs. Since Tropical Storm Helene has hit, he said requests and inquiries have been more hectic with a lot of people worried about scams.

Here's how not to get scammed

According to the Legal Aid of North Carolina, you should ask for an official ID from anyone claiming to be from the government, power company or insurance company.

You can verify any contractor by name and license on the N.C. Licensing Board for General Contractors website. Cody said a license number can also be found on a contract written up by a contractor.

Contact your insurance company first if your property has been damaged by a disaster. Some insurance companies require the adjuster's approval before work can be done. Shop around and compare estimates for any major repairs and know that legitimate contractors will provide written estimates for home repairs.

Avoid sharing personal information such as Social Security or bank account numbers, with anyone who contacts you first. If someone contacts you claiming to be from a government agency or organization, look up the number for that organization online and call to verify that the person is really an employee.

Remember that you should not be asked to pay to file any disaster assistance applications.

Here's what to keep in mind

Beware of contractors who knock on your door offering services because they noticed your home is damaged or are already working in your area. This is a common tactic of scam artists.

FEMA does not approve, endorse, certify, or recommend any contractors, individuals, or firms.

Do not hire a contractor who does not have a physical address or refuses to show ID.

Use a contractor who is backed by reliable references. The most reputable contractors have liability insurance, workers' compensation and are bonded.

Perform a quick Google search before hiring any contractor. Do they have a website? Have they scammed previous clients? Read any reviews.

Get a copy of your contract in writing from the contractor that includes the work to be done and, ideally, a completion date.

Check credentials with the N.C. Licensing Board for General Contractors. Any contractor taking jobs costing $40,000 is required to be licensed in North Carolina after a new statute law passed last year, increasing the cost threshold for requiring a license.

You may wish to request a copy of your contractor's Certificate of Insurance before they begin work, to ensure that the contractor is legitimate and that you will be covered if the contractor causes any damage to your home.

"We also have a complaint and investigations division for anybody that feels a contractor has scammed them," Cody said. "You can also check with your local permit and inspection office to find out if a building permit has been obtained by a contractor."

Be cautious about paying contractors before they begin work. If possible, wait until the work is finished and you are satisfied. Reputable contractors generally do not expect customers to pay the entire price upfront. Pay contractors by credit card if you can, so you can request a chargeback from your credit card company if they fail to do the work or if the work is unsatisfactory.

If you can't pay with a credit card, pay by check or get a written receipt from the contractor to keep a paper trail proving your payments.

"There may be times when a contractor has to make a change," Cody said. "It might be a situation where you want something, but the building code says you have to do it certain way. I would just make sure that a contractor is giving clear communication about any changes."

Cody understands that people want to make repairs as quickly as possible, but he cautions against rushing a project. He wants people to do their due diligence to ensure they're not being scammed or duped.

"People's homes are ruined," Chaddrick Francis said. "There's a lot of vultures out there that come during these times. Even licensed people, but make sure at the very least they do have some credibility."

Jade Jackson is a public safety reporter for IndyStar assisting The Citizen-Times, Asheville with Hurricane Helene coverage. Contact her at Jade.Jackson@IndyStar. Follow her on Twitter @IAMJADEJACKSON.

Suspect fraud?

If you have been affected by a scam or fraud, contact the North Carolina Attorney General's Office at 877-566-7226. Under many circumstances, scams and frauds are a crime so contact local law enforcement.

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WNC teams donate time, supplies while waiting for return of football

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Author: Evan Gerike; Asheville Citizen Times | Section: News | 631 Words
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ASHEVILLE – Early in the morning of Oct. 7, Erwin senior Bransun O'Mary was back in the parking lot behind the Warriors' field, helping sort donated supplies and load them into cars for the second time in less than a week.

Erwin, Asheville High, Hendersonville and Roberson are all among Western North Carolina schools with football players volunteering their time to help load and hand out supplies following the devastation left behind by Tropical Storm Helene on Sept. 27. Swain County players loaded onto a flatbed to help clean up flood damage in Bryson City. Franklin volleyball built wound kits. In Pisgah, some players became volunteer firefighters.

From all of them, the message is the same – with their communities hurting, it's time to give back.

"The people that we're supporting are also the people that support us," O'Mary said. "They come to our games on Friday nights. They watch us and they donate to us."

Now nearly three weeks removed from Erwin's last game, a 55-14 rivalry win over Enka on Sept. 20, the Warriors' once-promising season has taken a backseat. With no plans to resume playing football in Buncombe County as the water crisis persists, teams have instead turned to helping their neighbors.

The supplies came from Awe Outdoors, Inc., and Shingleton Farms in Hampstead, Pender County. It was the second shipment they sent to Erwin after the first arrived Oct. 3. There were typical supplies, like food, water, diapers and hygiene products, but there were also things like toys, tarps, firewood and even a grill.

Cars rolled in, trunks open, to take loads of supplies up the road to Erwin Middle, where a distribution site was set up.

On Thursday, with the first load, the plan had been to load supplies into trucks for distribution around the area. But when a line of cars showed up, O'Mary said they gave families as many supplies as they needed.

It's the least Erwin can do for the community, O'Mary said.

"It shows a lot of heart," O'Mary said. "We've got a lot of pride, and that's something we strive for – that Warrior pride."

After growing up in Asheville and seeing the devastation Helene brought, Asheville High senior DK Knox didn't feel right sitting at home as cleanup began. He reached out to coach Cort Radford, asking how he could help.

On Oct. 3, Knox helped a group of Asheville High coaches, including Radford, unload a box truck full of supplies at the Hillcrest community center.

"I felt like I could help a cause with them as they're doing this," Knox said.

The supplies were collected at a church in Asheboro, including things like dog food, water, diapers, canned goods and toilet paper.

It was one of several trailers Radford has brought from Asheboro over the past week. Even while unloading the box truck, a process that took only about 15 minutes, multiple members of the community stopped to help. By the time

they finished, there was more bottled water than room in the hallway.

"I'm feeling like I'm running a touchdown," one person told Radford. "There's a lot of scoring going on."

Gwen Nelson, who was working in the community center to organize the supplies, called the shipment "a blessing."

"This community has tried to pull together," Nelson said. "Asheville as well. I'm just happy to see it."

Though eager to return to the field, neither Knox nor Radford are prioritizing football over helping their neighbors. Still, Knox knows how getting back to the field with the Cougars can help the effort.

"We can start having fundraisers as a football team," Knox said. "I've seen what they've been doing for the community. We could do more fundraisers to help build back Biltmore (Village)."

Evan Gerike is the high school sports reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times. Email him at egerike@citizentimes.com or follow him on X, formerly Twitter, @EvanGerike.

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Life sentence for grandson in 2022 homicide

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Author: Rebecca Heliot; USA TODAY NETWORK | Section: News | 344 Words
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HENDERSONVILLE — The grandson of the slain owner of Hendersonville's Dixie Diner will serve a life sentence without parole after a jury found him guilty of first-degree murder in her killing, District Attorney R. Andrew Murray announced Oct. 8.

Jurors also found Austin Amos Kennedy Brynside, 24, guilty of first-degree burglary and felony conspiracy to commit common law robbery in the death of Paulette Clark, who died May 13, 2022, seven days after being shot in the eye with a high-powered BB gun, Murray said.

Clark also had been beaten with a blunt object in the attack, which occurred in her home about 2:30 a.m. as she was sleeping in her bed alongside husband Marty Clark, investigators found.

Murray said Brynside, of Hendersonville, had been arrested the day after the attack on charges of possession of cocaine, identity theft and parole violation. He initially denied involvement in the crime but confessed to the killing in a May 19, 2022, interview with Henderson County sheriff's Detective Andy Anderson and implicated his uncle, Maurice Jones Jr., who had been staying at the house with Paulette Clark, his mother, on the night of the attack, Murray said.

Jones pleaded guilty to accessory after the fact in August 2023.

Murray said Byrnside told Anderson he had been trying to rob and kill Marty Clark instead of his grandmother. But Murray said mistakenly harming someone when trying to hurt another person does not mitigate responsibility for the crime.

He said the jury in the two-week-long trial reached its verdict Sept. 25, shortly before the arrival of Tropical Storm Helene. Though there was no eyewitness to the crime, testimony in the case by witnesses including Byrnside's mother, Latasha Jones, who had been staying in Clark's house at the time, established that the BB wound resulted in Clark's death and that he had possessed and been seen with brass knuckles that may have been used to beat Paulette Clark, said Murray, who called the murder a "senseless crime."

Superior Court Judge Daniel Kuehnert presided over the case.

The Dixie Diner has since been sold to a new owner.

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One rookie QB has his team in the top 7 of the Week 6 NFL power rankings

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Author: Nate Davis; USA TODAY | Section: Sports | 1573 Words
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NFL power rankings entering Week 6 of the 2024 season (previous rank in parentheses):

1. Kansas City Chiefs (1): With their first double-digit win of the season on Monday night, K.C. became the 10th reigning champion of the Super Bowl era (since 1966) to start 5-0 and the first in five years. Now, they get a week off before their Super Bowl 54/58 rematch with San Francisco.

2. Minnesota Vikings (2): They wobbled out of London with a close-shave victory. However QB Sam Darnold looked like ... Sam Darnold. And RB Aaron Jones' hip injury further hindered the offense. Good thing there's more to this team — like a ferocious defense and OLB Andrew Van Ginkel, the first player in league history to record at least three sacks and multiple pick-sixes in the first five weeks of a season.

3. Baltimore Ravens (3): What do you know? They actually overcame a double-digit fourth-quarter deficit Sunday in Cincinnati. But in all seriousness, if any club is going to emerge as a dominant force in 2024, it might well be this one — the first in 18 seasons to rush for 1,000 yards through Week 5. Still, amazing as the Lamar Jackson-Derrick Henry duo is shaping up, the league's 31st-ranked pass defense needs to shape up.

4. Detroit Lions (4): Hope you fellas got your rest during the bye. Next up? A brutal five-stretch with road games at Dallas, Minnesota, Green Bay and Houston.

5. Atlanta Falcons (10): QB Kirk Cousins might be one questionable non-call against K.C. from being 3-0 in prime time with ATL. However, barring a flex — Week 14 at Minnesota, anyone? — "Kirko Chainz" is only scheduled to play one more night game this season. Thursday, he joined Tom Brady as the only players to pass for 500 yards and at least four TDs under the network lights.

6. Tampa Bay Buccaneers (6): After dealing with the wrath of Hurricane Helene, the Bucs are about to flee early to New Orleans as a storm that's apparently far more fierce (Hurricane Milton) takes direct aim at Tampa. Let's hope a good football team and its fans get a good outcome this week, despite current prognostications.

7. Washington Commanders (9): Lotta firsts here. First place. First team with 13 rushing TDs through five weeks since Gerald Ford was president. First rookie (Jayden Daniels) to start his career with 1,000 passing yards and 250 rushing yards five games in. Pretty soon, their supporters will be musing about the possibility of their first Super Bowl trip post-Joe Gibbs.

8. Houston Texans (13): Their record (4-1) is impressive. But the only division leader to be outscored by more than 10 points is probably a few breaks from being 1-4, and the injury concerns are only mounting with WR Nico Collins about to miss time with a bum hamstring.

9. Philadelphia Eagles (11): They should be rested coming off the bye, WRs A.J. Brown (hamstring) and DeVonta Smith (concussion) due back Sunday. And for a team that also figuratively needs to get healthy, a date with Cleveland is made to order.

10. Green Bay Packers (12): They only have to leave Wisconsin once (for Duval County) in the next six weeks. Green and golden opportunity to cement themselves anew as bona fide Super Bowl threats.

11. Buffalo Bills (5): Two weeks ago, QB Josh Allen was just about everyone's (very premature) MVP pick. Since

then? He's completed 42.4% of his passes, compiled a 65.0 QB rating and accounted for one TD and zero victories.

12. Arizona Cardinals (23): They're 2-0 against NFC West foes and feature the best QB-RB rushing tandem (Kyler Murray, James Conner) west of Baltimore.

13. San Francisco 49ers (7): They're 2-0 against AFC East competition, which is far less helpful when it's time to invoke tiebreakers — especially given the Niners are off to an 0-2 start in their own division. Their 38-game winning streak under HC Kyle Shanahan in games with a double-digit fourth-quarter lead ended Sunday.

14. Dallas Cowboys (22): Maybe they've found something with RB Rico Dowdle. Maybe a defense fielding so many backups found a rallying cry. Maybe we'll know more in a week after they try to win their first home game of 2024 against a Detroit squad that lost at AT&T Stadium under dubious circumstances late last season.

15. Indianapolis Colts (15): Going back to last season in Cleveland, Joe Flacco has thrown for at least 300 yards and two TDs in his past five starts. At 39, he's the oldest quarterback in league history with such a string of games.

16. Pittsburgh Steelers (8): Not a great sign that QB Justin Fields was hit on about a quarter of his dropbacks Sunday night despite playing a defense missing its two top pass rushers — maybe even more reason not to switch to QB Russell Wilson given the sad state of Pittsburgh's O-line.

17. Denver Broncos (18): Only the Chargers are allowing fewer points per game than the 14.6 of the Broncos, who also have 19 sacks and eight takeaways.

18. Los Angeles Chargers (17): Don't know how rejuvenated a battered group will be coming out the bye. We do know Denver has been a house of horrors for the Bolts, who have dropped 10 of 11 in the Mile High City.

19. Chicago Bears (21): A huge reason they've won a league-best eight in a row at Soldier Field? The defense has generated 18 turnovers in those games.

20. New York Jets (19): The speculation around potentially acquiring WR Davante Adams is all fine and good — sensible even. But there's zero reason a team with RBs Breece Hall and Braelon Allen should rank last in the league in rushing (80.4 ypg).

21. Cincinnati Bengals (20): A highly competitive 1-4 team has basically exhausted its margin for error — but isn't scheduled to face an opponent with a winning record until its Week 10 rematch with the Ravens.

22. New York Giants (27): Since his disastrous Week 1 return to the lineup, QB Daniel Jones has accounted for four TDs, one turnover and a 95.8 passer rating — including Sunday's win at Seattle, when WR Malik Nabers and RB Devin Singletary were sidelined. Maybe paying Jones $40 million per is reasonable after all.

23. Seattle Seahawks (14): A weak schedule has masked some issues here, including the NFC's second-worst turnover differential (-3). But most concerning is an offense that's entirely unbalanced, throwing the most passes in the league and running the ball the fewest times.

24. Los Angeles Rams (24): Think they've become a little too reliant on RB Kyren Williams? He has a team-high 109 offensive touches ... 89 more than anyone else on the team.

25. New Orleans Saints (16): A three-game slide marked by plummeting offensive production seemed quite likely Monday night to be exacerbated by QB Derek Carr's injury, one that apparently left him unable to effectively throw the ball. Now a league-worst 1-6 in prime-time games over the past three seasons, the Saints also suddenly don't seem like a prime-time option for Adams, either, particularly if Carr can't play.

26. Carolina Panthers (25): For all the focus on their quarterback issue, they've allowed a league-high 20 offensive touchdowns — four more than any other team.

27. Las Vegas Raiders (26): For all the focus on their quarterback issue, they've committed a league-high nine turnovers — which, admittedly, gets back to their quarterback issue, one that may be in flux.

28. Tennessee Titans (29): For all the focus on their quarterback issue, they've committed a league-high nine turnovers (in just four games) — which, admittedly, gets back to their quarterback issue, one that may be in flux depending on Will Levis' injured shoulder.

29. Miami Dolphins (30): For all the focus on their quarterback issue, they've scored a league-low 60 points (after scoring 70 in one game last season) – which, admittedly, gets back to their quarterback issue, one that may be temporarily stabilizing with Tyler Huntley.

30. Jacksonville Jaguars (32): With former LSU teammate Nabers concussed, WR Brian Thomas Jr. now leads all rookies with 397 receiving yards and all AFC players (minimum 20 receptions) with 18.0 yards per catch.

31. New England Patriots (28): For all the focus on their quarterback issue ... well, it's only going to intensify for a team averaging a league-low 119.4 passing yards per game and seemingly nearing a switch to rookie first-rounder Drake Maye.

32. Cleveland Browns (31): For all the focus on their quarterback issue ... well, theirs has been sacked a league-most 26 times. But Deshaun Watson almost surely isn't going to get sacked by upper management any time soon as he'd still incur a nearly $173 million cap hit — if cut next spring.

Follow USA TODAY Sports' Nate Davis on X, formerly Twitter, @ByNateDavis.

NFL Week 6 games

All times Eastern

THURSDAY: 49ers at Seahawks, 8:15 p.m. (Amazon Prime Video)

SUNDAY: Jaguars at Bears, 9:30 a.m. in London, England (NFL Network); Colts at Titans, 1 p.m. (CBS); Texans at Patriots, 1 p.m. (CBS); Buccaneers at Saints, 1 p.m. (FOX); Commanders at Ravens, 1 p.m. (CBS); Cardinals at Packers, 1 p.m. (FOX); Browns at Eagles, 1 p.m. (FOX); Chargers at Broncos, 4:05 p.m. (CBS); Steelers at Raiders, 4:05 p.m. (CBS); Falcons at Panthers, 4:25 p.m. (FOX); Lions at Cowboys, 4:25 p.m. (FOX); Bengals at Giants, 8:20 p.m. (NBC)

MONDAY: Bills at Jets, 8:15 p.m. (ESPN)

TEAMS ON BYE: Chiefs, Dolphins, Rams, Vikings

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NewsBank inc.

PCHS football to return to field Monday at R-S Central

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OpenURL Link

Polk County's revised 2024 regular-season schedule will have a nostalgic feel as the Wolverines return to action for the first time since mid-September.

Polk will return to the field for the first time since September 12 on Monday, traveling to R-S Central for a 7:30 p.m. kickoff. The Wolverines will then travel Friday, Oct. 18 to Chase, that date remaining as originally set on the team's schedule before the remnants of Hurricane Helene swept through Western North Carolina.

The next two games on Polk's calendar will also remain the same – the Wolverines will host East Rutherford on October 25 and then Brevard on November 1. Polk will then close the regular season on November 8, traveling to Hendersonville. The two teams typically met at season's end when in the Western Highlands Conference.

The state 1A playoffs are set to begin on November 15.

October 14: At R-S Central

October 18: At Chase

October 25: East Rutherford

November 1: Brevard

November 8: At Hendersonville

The post PCHS football to return to field Monday at R-S Central appeared first on The Tryon Daily Bulletin.

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Remember the patience and kindness

October 10, 2024 | Tryon Daily Bulletin, The (NC)
Author: Pam Stone | Section: I'm Just Saying - Pam Stone | 453 Words
OpenURL Link

It's taken me years—decades, really—to begin to understand the phrases my late English mother used throughout her life. We've all heard Britons described as having 'a stiff upper lip' and seemingly incapable of expressing themselves in times of trouble by dismissing their own concerns as, 'Oh, well, mustn't grumble.'

I used to joke about it: "How repressed can they be? They can lose a leg, their dog gets run over, then they clear their throat and say, 'Well, well, mustn't grumble.'" What's wrong with you people? For Pete's sake, grumble!! Cry!! Your cortisol must be through the roof!

I'd dismissed an entire generation of people as detached, unfeeling, cold as a fish.

When Helene slashed her way through the Southeast and we witnessed the devastation, I finally got it. I have never in my life seen Paul clap his hand across his mouth in horror as we watched videos of Chimney Rock Village being wiped off the map. I watched the heartrending footage of people—the family and infant on the roof—I won't go on, you know the one—until my heart felt as though it would burst.

And then, when asked if we suffered damage to our own home, both Paul and I felt stymied to reply. Because when you are keenly aware that hundreds, maybe thousands, are missing, that people disappeared along with their homes as the wall of water engulfed and swept away everything in its path, then it is impossible to say, 'Well, we had trees down and one took off our back deck...'

Mustn't grumble.

For everyone, as with my mother, who endured the Blitz in London, running down the darkened streets regardless of weather for the safety of the Underground during the wailing of an air raid siren, who witnessed houses and people in their own neighborhood blown to smithereens, and who tried to feed a family of four on ration cards that allowed a household three eggs for the week and two cups of flour...to somehow survive while trying not to collapse into sobs because you simply have to keep going, well, you need 'a stiff upper lip.' Because you know as soon as you start crying, you won't be able to stop.

We are witnessing unprecedented destruction, horror and grief. And as inspiring as the outpouring of support has been from countless volunteers, we will also need to remember that for many, this has created lifelong trauma—even if homes are rebuilt, even if there are reunions with loved ones, they will be indelibly marked for life.

May we all remember the patience and kindness upon which love relies long after the visible destruction is repaired. So much healing lies before us.

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Hurricane Helene creates 'severe environmental disaster'

October 10, 2024 | Watauga Democrat, The (Boone, NC)
Author: Nick Fogleman nick.fogleman@wataugademocrat.com | Section: Local | 889 Words
OpenURL Link

BOONE — Rivers swelled, trees fell and landslides engulfed mountainsides as the landscape of Watauga County radically changed when Hurricane Helene brought historic rain and wind to the area.

As support and recovery efforts continue across the region, assessments of the environmental damage have yet to account for the devastating effects Helene has had on the ecosystem.

"It is my personal perspective that this is going to be the most severe environmental disaster in the recorded history of this area. We've experienced nothing like this before," said New River Conservancy Executive Director Andrew Downs.

The rivers and streams that run through the mountains are vital to the economy, recreation and identity of Watauga County. Throughout the storm, unprecedented water and debris swept through these areas, leaving a trail of environmental destruction.

Environmental organizations are just beginning to inspect the damage to the ecosystem.

"We're just getting our minds around the human toll of this hurricane and the flooding, but the environmental toll is also staggering. We've seen drowned wildlife and habitat destruction along the rivers and watersheds, and widespread erosion and sedimentation," Blue Ridge Conservancy's Director of Communications Leila Jackson said.

Days before Helene, Boone and surrounding communities were struck with storms that filled up the natural sponges that typically absorb water before the full brunt of the storm made its way to the Appalachian Mountains.

"That set the stage for when the real part of the storm arrived," said Dr. Bill Anderson, an App State hydrogeology professor. "There's no storage or anywhere for that water to go but rush down our mountain valleys and get into the major streams and try to get out of here as quickly as possible."

With nowhere to go, rainwater made its way into Watauga County's rivers and streams, along with the houses, trees, asphalt, cars, and sediments that were destroyed and swept into the river.

"There's all the materials, from tires to construction debris, that are in the river that are going to have a long-term impact," Downs said.

On Sept. 27, the USGS sensor on the Watauga River measured a discharge rate of 32,300 ft3/s, about 1000x more than what was recorded just days before, and a height of 25 ft. Both readings were still climbing upward when the sensor broke during the storm.

As flood waters and materials made their way through river beds, they caused significant damage to the river banks, or riparian zones.

"Those natural filters that protected the river were wiped out, eradicated in many places, and those are going to need to be rebuilt," Downs said.

These natural protection systems have been crippled by physical damage, and this has left the environment more susceptible to chemical and biological damage.

Along with the wreckage of buildings and roads, water likely picked up the toxic materials, pesticides and sewage it came in contact with.

"Who knows what kind of contaminants that we all have in our households for cleaning and so forth. Those are all in the streams now," Anderson said. "When you're out in the non-municipal areas, people have septic tanks, and I would guess that a number of those have been compromised or maybe completely inundated."

Large amounts of pollution, toxicants and waste can cause a variety of problems for mountain ecosystems.

They can influence water and habitat quality, food availability, wildlife behavior, and aquatic oxygen levels and disrupt natural cycles within an ecosystem. This can reduce wildlife's overall rates of survival and affect systems that rely on healthy waterways.

"All other systems rely on water, you don't have to overthink it," Downs said. "Water isn't a building block, it's the building block."

Contaminants can also cause dangerous algae blooms making it even more difficult for ecosystems to recover.

Over time, the rivers and streams will move some of these contaminants downstream and out of the region, but Helene's timing means the scars left behind will take more time to heal and make natural and human communities more vulnerable as the ecosystem repairs.

With winter around the corner, areas where trees fell and landslides ripped apart soil and vegetation have little time for secondary succession, when new plants and grass recolonize disrupted ecosystems.

"We're going to have a lot of barren areas throughout the winter," Anderson said. "So when we do get rain, and we get quite a bit of rain throughout the winter, I think we're going to be more prone to landslides and see more sediment in our streams."

As the wreckage and debris from our communities begins to be cleared, unnatural levels of sediment in the water ways remain an issue.

Studies show that while sediment is a vital component of ecological functions when it exceeds natural limits, it can have a range of negative effects on aquatic ecosystems and act as a sink for contaminants.

"That's going to compromise the environment and anything trying to live in those streams," Anderson said. "Our mountain streams are cool and clear environments. That is what the animals that live in those environments have adapted to."

In some areas, the rushing water created new pathways for runoff and altered the natural floodplain. Depending on the severity, this could cause increased erosion and flooding in areas where it was not typical.

"This is what streams do; that's how they wear down our mountains, and they've been doing this for a very long time," Anderson said.

The assessment of the environmental destruction caused by Hurricane Helene will only add to the total account of devastation.

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Additional linemen crews mobilized to Watauga, Ashe counties as BRE outages under 2,600

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Author: Staff Report news@wataugademocrat.com | Section: Local | 629 Words
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With nearly 97% of Blue Ridge Energy members restored with power after Hurricane Helene left 63,000 members in the dark, the cooperative is able to move additional manpower from its 500+ line technicians, tree workers and road graders to the hardest hit areas in Watauga and Ashe counties although crews continue work in all areas.

As of 4:30 p.m. on Thursday, Oct. 10, crews are working to restore the final 2,535 members. Of those outages, 1,451 are in Watauga County, 930 are in Ashe County, 82 are in Caldwell County, 49 are in Wilkes County, 15 are in Alleghany County and eight are in Avery County.

Across the system, the cooperative has dispersed teams of service crews responsible for repairing and energizing tap lines as well as construction crews responsible for replacing broken power poles—a job that can take 4 to 6 hours in the best of conditions.

The raging swift water led to flooding and mudslides, downed trees, washed away bridges and not only roads and pavement but in many cases the actual ground beneath them. The storm took down much of the cooperative's electric grid, leading to quick rebuilds just to get power restored as quickly as possible. Long-term repairs will go on for months to ensure the electric grid is strong and reliable.

"Blue Ridge Energy serves a very rough, mountainous terrain and our crews are accustomed to working in high winds, snow, ice and some flooding but nothing close to the conditions and level of damage caused by Helene," said Renee Walker, director of public relations for Blue Ridge Energy.

Currently, the cooperative is expecting most of the power restoration to be complete by midnight Friday. Several hundred outages in the most damaged locations will carry over into the weekend before all restoration is complete. Additional time will be needed for structures that require owner repair before restoration is possible and areas that are totally inaccessible with no way to reach the structure.

The cooperative continues emphasizing the following safety measures:

Downed Power Line Safety

Downed power lines can still be energized and therefore dangerous, or even deadly, so stay far away. Downed lines can be hidden underneath fallen trees, water and other affected structures so stay alert and use caution around these areas. Only a trained line technician should ever go near a downed power line. Report downed lines by calling 1-800-451-5474.

Protect Line Workers:

Move over and slow down if you see line technicians or trucks working on roadsides. This is especially difficult work under current conditions with many roads washed out, severely damaged, or down to one lane roads. Please slow down for your safety and the protection of all those working to restore power.Be alert for flaggers and other traffic directions and indications of work under way.Don't drive distracted. Road damage and debris is scattered throughout the area.

Generator Safety:

The only safe way to connect a portable generator to your home's wiring is to have a licensed electrical contractor

install a transfer switch.Never connect a generator to your home's electrical system. It can "back feed" and potentially harm or kill line technicians working on power lines.Keep generators away from water.Always turn off a generator and let it cool down before refueling.Never use a generator inside your home or garage. Install a carbon monoxide detector for added safety.

To check outage status

Call 1-800-451-5474 to speak with a member service representativeLink to live outage map: https://bremco.maps.sienatech.com/Refer to general restoration estimates at www.BlueRidgeEnergy.comReport new outages by calling 1-800-448-2383 orUse our Blue Ridge Energy mobile app orText "OUT" to 70216 if your mobile number is on your account

Blue Ridge Energy serves some 80,000 members in Caldwell, Watauga, Ashe, and Alleghany counties as well as parts of Avery, Alexander and Wilkes counties. Learn more at www.BlueRidgeEnergy.com or on the cooperative's social media on Facebook, X and Instagram.

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NewsBank inc.

Boone Planning and Inspections provides assessment updates

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Author: Staff report staff@wataugademocrat.com | Section: Local | 382 Words
OpenURL Link

BOONE — The Town of Boone has provided an update regarding the Town of Boone Planning and Inspections Department, which includes information regarding building damage assessments, storm damage-related permits and the Town of Boone Planning and Inspections Department's operations going forward.

Building Damage Assessment

In the aftermath of the extreme damage of Hurricane Helene, the Planning and Inspections Department undertook a comprehensive assessment of readily visible damage to buildings within its corporate limits and marked buildings with visible damage that necessitated repair permits with a condemnation placard, according to the town.

This placard serves as a notification that the building has been inspected and requires attention. Importantly, the term "condemnation" in this context does not imply that the buildings are beyond repair, in fact, the majority of the damage is repairable and the placards are removed once the necessary permits are obtained and safety is assured, according to the town.

For those whose properties have been marked with a condemnation placard and seek further information, the department encourages reaching out to the Town of Boone Planning and Inspections Department for assistance.

Storm Damage Related Permits

In a significant move to aid recovery, the Town of Boone is waiving permit fees up to $3,000 for any storm damage repair permit related to Hurricane Helene, which is expected to cover the vast majority of the damage. This initiative reflects the Town's commitment to a swift and efficient restoration for its residents and business owners.

The department opened this past week in order to begin processing permits related to the hurricane and other emergencies to ensure public safety. At this time, most recovery permits are being issued within twenty-four hours of submittal.

Town of Boone Planning and Inspections Operations

Last week and this week, the Planning and Inspections Department, along with Boone Fire, have focused diligently on providing damage assessment support to both the Town of Boone and Watauga County. The department was able to resume building inspections last week through a collaboration with the Town of Blowing Rock's Planning and Inspections Department.

Though the department's assistance with damage assessment will continue for some time to come, starting, Friday, Oct. 11, the department will resume its full range of services, although we anticipate potential delays due to the ongoing hurricane-related work.

For more information, please contact Town of Boone Planning and Inspections at (828) 268-6960.

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History of Watauga County tornados

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Author: Nick Fogleman | Section: News | 385 Words
OpenURL Link

BLOWING ROCK — Just days before Hurricane Helene struck Watauga County, a tornado blew through Blowing Rock.

According to the NWS, the tornado touched down at 6:38 p.m. and traveled 0.6 miles northeast before lifting near the Chetola Resort.

This is the fourth confirmed tornado in Watauga County since tracking began in 1950 and the second in Blowing Rock since 1996.

In April 1996, a tornado briefly touched down at the Tweetsie Railroad Attraction. The tornado damaged 16 vehicles and injured two people.

The tornado struck a powwow organized to raise money for the Indians of Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

According to Watauga Democrat archives, a funnel cloud lifted a man 10 feet into the air and slammed him down on the asphalt of Tweetsie Railroad.

Scott Richards, who was 25 at the time, broke a rib after being dropped in the parking lot. Another man broke his wrist when equipment fell on top of him due to the wind.

Richards was a drummer in the rain dance performed just before the funnel cloud arrived.

The tornado ripped off a car door, broke multiple windows, and broke a man's ribs after he was lifted into the air and dropped. The tornado was rated as an F1 with gusts of 86-110 mph. The tornado destroyed is believed to have caused $50,000 worth of damage.

"I didn't hear the freight train noise that everyone talks about, but you could feel the air pressure drop and suck the air right out of your lungs," a witness said at the time.

While the event wasn't as lucrative as it could have been, organizers said at the time that didn't mean it lost money.

According to the Blue Ridge Now tornado tracker, in June 1998, a thunderstorm produced a tornado and hail up to three inches in diameter in Reese, near the Tennessee border.

Numerous trees and power lines were brought down, leaving approximately 3,300 without power. The tornado, which was rated as an F0, destroyed a few barns and caused approximately $20,000 worth of damage.

The last tornado to hit Watauga County was in August, 2023, when an F1 tornado formed in Avery County and briefly crossed into western Watauga County and uprooted trees in the area. The tornado traveled roughly .3 miles and caused roughly $5,000 damage. This is one of the two recorded tornadoes in Avery County.

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Study: Climate change boosts hurricanes - Climate change boosted Helene's deadly rain and wind and scientists say same is likely for Milton

October 10, 2024 | Winston-Salem Journal (NC)
Author: ALEXA ST. JOHN Associated Press | Section: B | 898 Words
Page: 2
OpenURL Link

Read more of AP's climate coverage at http://www.apnews.com/climate-and-environment

Human-caused climate change boosted a devastating Hurricane Helene's rainfall by about 10% and intensified its winds by about 11%, scientists said in a new flash study released just as a strengthening Hurricane Milton threatens the Florida coast less than two weeks later.

The warming climate boosted Helene's wind speeds by about 13 miles per hour and made the high sea temperatures that fueled the storm 200 to 500 times more likely, World Weather Attribution calculated Wednesday from Europe. Ocean temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico were about 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit above average, WWA said.

"Hurricane Helene and the storms that were happening in the region anyway have all been amplified by the fact that the air is warmer and can hold more moisture, which meant that the rainfall totals - which, even without climate change, would have been incredibly high given the circumstances - were even higher," Ben Clarke, a study co-author and a climate researcher at Imperial College London, said in an interview.

Milton will likely be similarly juiced, the authors said.

The scientists warned that continued burning of fossil fuels will lead to more hurricanes like Helene, with "unimaginable" floods well inland, not just on coasts. Many of those who died in Helene fell victim to massive inland flooding, rather than high winds.

Helene made landfall in Florida with record storm surge 15 feet high and catastrophic sustained winds reaching 140 miles per hour, pummeling Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee and Virginia.

It decimated remote towns throughout the Appalachians, left millions without power, cellular service and supplies and killed more than 230 people. Helene was the deadliest hurricane to hit the mainland U.S. since Katrina in 2005.

Helene dumped more than 40 trillion gallons of rain - an unprecedented amount of water - onto the region, meteorologists estimated. That rainfall would have been much less intense if humans hadn't warmed the climate, according to WWA, an international scientist collaborative that runs rapid climate attribution studies.

"When you start talking about the volumes involved, when you add even just a few percent on top of that, it makes it even much more destructive," Clarke said.

Hurricanes as intense as Helene were once expected every 130 years on average, but today are about 2.5 times more likely in the region, the scientists calculated.

The WWA launched in 2015 to assess the extent which extreme weather events could be attributed to climate change. The organization's rapid studies aren't peer-reviewed but use peer-reviewed methods.

The team of scientists tested the influence of climate change on Helene by analyzing weather data and climate models including the Imperial College Storm Model, the Climate Shift Index for oceans and the standard WWA approach, which compares an actual event with what might have been expected in a world that hasn't warmed

about 1.3 degrees Celsius since preindustrial times.

A separate analysis of Helene last week by Department of Energy Lawrence Berkeley National Lab scientists determined that climate change caused 50% more rainfall in some parts of Georgia and the Carolinas, and that observed rainfall was "made up to 20 times more likely in these areas because of global warming." That study was also not peer-reviewed but used a method published in a study about Hurricane Harvey.

Kim Cobb, director of the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society, wasn't involved in either study. She said there are uncertainties in exactly how much climate change is supercharging storms like Helene, but "we know that it's increasing the power and devastation of these storms."

She said Helene and Milton should serve "as a wake up call" for emergency preparedness, resilience planning and the increased use of fossil fuels.

"Going forward, additional warming that we know will occur over the next 10 or 20 years will even worsen the statistics of hurricanes," she said, "and we will break new records."

Analysis is already indicating climate change made possible the warmed sea temperatures that also rapidly intensified Milton. Clarke said the two massive storms in quick succession illustrates the potential future of climate change if humans don't stop it.

"As we go into the future and our results show this as well, we still have control over what trajectory this goes in as to what risks we face in the future, what costs we pay in the future," he said. "That just hinges on how we change our energy systems and how many more fossil fuels we burn."

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Legislature unveils $273M in relief funding - Legislature approves $273 million in initial Helene relief effort funding

October 10, 2024 | Winston-Salem Journal (NC)
Author: RICHARD CRAVER Staff Reporter | Section: A | 1859 Words
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OpenURL Link

State Republican legislative leaders cleared Wednesday a $273 million Hurricane Helene relief funding bill that represents the state's initial recovery assistance.

About $250 million will be made accessible to state agencies and local governments toward relief and recovery operations in the 25 affected counties that include Alleghany, Ashe, Watauga and Wilkes.

The relief funding was inserted into House Bill 149 via a gut-and-replace bill mechanism.

The Senate voted first to clear HB149, followed by the House. Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper is expected to sign the bill shortly.

The state has a rainy-day fund exceeding $4.75 billion.

The $273 million will be used primarily as required state matches to secure federal funds. House speaker Tim Moore, R-Cleveland, said the expectation is a 10% state match of a 90% federal contribution.

"There is not a specific earmark of any of these dollars for a specific program," said Senate leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham. "The bulk of the money at this point is going to provide the executive branch with some cash-flow flexibility for state agencies to do the things they're already empowered to do" in the recovery efforts.

When asked about why the legislature is not providing more from the rainy-day fund, Berger said, "This is not all of it, not by a long shot."

"We have to be aware that much of what we will need for recovery will be funded at the federal level by FEMA, and the state's obligation is a match of some sort.

"We don't want to get too far ahead of the federal government on that because we don't want to supplant those federal dollars with state dollars if we're not required to."

Proposed state relief money a drop in the bucket

Moore said legislators recognize that the first relief funding bill will not come close to meeting projections of billions of dollars in damages. He said those experiencing major residential damages, if not a total loss, include several western N.C. legislators.

"We know this is just a drop in the bucket to what's going to be the total cost," Moore said in addressing the bill. "We're well over $10 billion, and it's going to be higher than that."

A second one-day session focused on disaster relief efforts is scheduled for Oct. 24.

"This will (be) multiple years that this (recovery) process has to be dealt with at the state level and the federal level," Moore said.

Berger said HB149 will suspend into at least early 2025 the post-COVID-19 pandemic law that requires the Council

of State to renew every 30 days a governor's executive orders on declared emergencies.

The bill will waive temporarily driver's license renewals in those counties, along with certain environmental regulations, such as burning, road construction and wastewater, to accelerate the recovery process.

There will be small business loans made in conjunction with Golden Leaf Foundation that will be reimbursed through FEMA.

"Recovering from Hurricane Helene will be no small task," Berger said. "I believe, we, the people of North Carolina, are up to that task. This is just a first step."

Berger and Moore said they have met with Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper to get his input on the relief legislation, as well as those of minority leaders Sen. Dan Blue of Wake County and Rep. Robert Reives of Chatham County.

"North Carolina is facing an unprecedented disaster that requires an unprecedented response through a massive partnership among federal, state, local and non-profit partners to get Western North Carolina the help it needs to recover," Cooper spokesman Jordan Monaghan said.

"The governor welcomes the General Assembly's return to allocate critical recovery funding for communities hit by Hurricane Helene as a first of many steps in rebuilding Western North Carolina to be more resilient and stronger than ever."

Voting changes for NC general election

A legislative staff analysis of HB149 shows how legislators are providing guidance to board of elections in the 25 affected counties for handling the upcoming Nov. 5 general election.

Most of the affected counties are conservative leaning outside Buncombe, Mecklenburg and Watauga.

Berger said much of the emergency rule elections changes has been approved by the state Board of Elections, or in consultation with the board.

"These are all common-sense steps we can take to ensure that western North Carolinians in the affected counties can vote no matter where they are in the state," Berger said.

About $5 million will be provided to county boards of elections for voter outreach and communication efforts.

Absentee ballots for voters in the 25 counties can be returned to any county board of elections, early voting sites or precincts, as well as establishing a hotline for displaced voters from the 25 counties.

Berger said there will be "additional flexibilities for appointing election judges and poll workers, including from outside a particular county," such as state employees without taking leave from their jobs.

There will be the ability to modify previously adopted early voting formats that could include changing and combining early voting sites and precincts, and amending the number of early voting hours and days.

Public school calendar changes

HB149 contains language providing direction for how school systems in the 25 affected counties can adjust their 2024-25 calendars.

HB149 allows public schools to excuse days missed for schools that closed during September and October related to Hurricane Helene damages.

Other elements include:

Expands the amount of authorized remove instruction time for schools in the 25 affected counties for the remainder of the school year.Treats employees and contractors of public school units as having worked on days deemed completed and provide funding to replaced lost compensation of school nutrition employees.Requires the state Department of Public Instruction to report on calendar flexibility and compensation provided.Waives requirements for students enrolled in educator preparation program to complete clinical internships over a certain amount of time if they were scheduled to complete the internships in December.

'Make sure everybody gets what they need up there'

Berger, Moore and several legislators representing western N.C. said they are hearing from frustrated and angry residents about the effectiveness of the relief efforts to date.

There is concerns about the repeating of misinformation claims that FEMA and the state are purposefully neglecting conservative-leaning counties.

Several western N.C. legislators praised FEMA and state relief efforts, but also expressed their concerns that it wasn't available as quickly as needed after the flooding began.

Some legislators said the mountain parts of western N.C. already tend to be overlooked, forgotten about, and may lean too much on their ruggedness and a culture of being uncomfortable with government assistance - all of which may lead residents not to reach out for help.

"There is a lot of distrust in the areas I have, but I hope we can begin to show that North Carolina is stepping up to its responsibilities and we are here for the people of the west," said Sen. Ralph Hise, R-McDowell.

Berger said legislators will study over the coming months the state's immediate relief efforts to determine what worked and didn't work, and how they can be improved.

"Now is not the time to litigate those sorts of things," Berger said. "There will be a time when we can go back and look at how things proceeded.

"We want to make sure everybody gets what they need up there. We want to identify those problems when they happen, try to correct them and make sure we know the reasons so in the future we don't have the same conditions."

Berger said "there is nothing in this bill" in regards to temporarily relaxing environmental regulations "will affect the health and safety in terms of rebuilding requirements."

Re-building concerns

There has been concern expressed that recent legislation that loosened some state building codes may have played a role in making buildings more susceptible to flooding and landslide devastation.

A New York Times article last week - titled "How North Carolina Left Homes Vulnerable to Helene" - cited that the state Republican supermajority has refused to limit construction of new homes on steep slopes, blocked a rule requiring said homes to be elevated above a certain height, and weakened protections intended to address potential landslides.

Moore responded to the story by saying "it was simply wrong, that regulatory reform in these cases somehow made buildings more susceptible to damage. That simply is not true. You have buildings that have been destroyed that have been there 60 years."

Democratic legislative leaders have discussed the rebuilding of western N.C. must take into consideration climate change realities in terms of permanent building solutions.

"We want to make sure that the rebuild that takes place to the extent that we're talking about something permanent, that we can get that moving as quickly as possible, and not that we want to cut any corners," Berger said.

Veto overrides on hold?

The House floor agenda lists a veto override vote on Senate Bill 445, titled "Recording of Court-Filed Documents," that the Senate overrode by a 27-7 vote on Sept. 9.

There has been expectations of both chambers casting Wednesday veto override votes on House Bill 10, which features Republican priorities of $460 million in K-12 Opportunity Scholarship funding for the 2024-25 school year, and would require all sheriffs to cooperate with federal ICE officials.

Cooper vetoed HB10 on Sept. 10.

On Wednesday, HB10 was moved to the next 1-day session, on Oct. 24.

The Opportunity Scholarship language in HB10 allows North Carolina parents - no matter how much they make - to get vouchers to help cover tuition for K-12 private or religious schools for their children.

It's likely the Republican supermajorities in both chambers will override such a veto, as they have seven of Cooper's eight vetoes this session.

Cooper has declared a state public education emergency in response to the proposed Opportunity Scholarship expansion.

There are more than 72,000 voucher applications for this school year, but only about 16,000 students were approved before the money ran out. The $460 million would cover the 2024-25 costs for all applicants.

The funding for the Opportunity Scholarship waitlist is retroactive, with eligible families qualifying for a tuition reimbursement from their schools.

Liberal-leaning response

Alexandra Sirota, executive director of the liberal-leaning N.C. Budget & Tax Center, said that "legislators have the opportunity to support the immediate response to Hurricane Helene's devastation in Western N.C. and ensure the people in every community impacted by climate disasters have what they need right now to be safe and begin the long road to recovery.

"While federal aid will be important, the state should take on the responsibility of ensuring that every disaster survivor - especially those historically marginalized and with low incomes including people of color, seniors, people with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, people with limited English proficiency, and rural residents - is reached with food, housing, water, cash assistance and care to secure a full recovery."

Sirota said that since "the scale of need is historic, drawing down the Savings Reserve Fund that stands at $4.75 billion is essential but insufficient.

"Lawmakers must also act now to pause the scheduled income tax reductions for profitable corporations and the wealthy few, which are scheduled for January."

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