

FEMA official, Cooper say disinformation harms Helene effort

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Author: Adam Wagner; Staff Writer | Section: News | 926 Words

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Disinformation and misinformation are harming the ability of storm-battered communities in Western North Carolina to receive federal aid at the time they need it most, Gov. Roy Cooper and FEMA Administrator Deanna Criswell said this week.

The remarks come after a man was arrested and charged with going armed to the terror of the public after allegedly roaming Rutherford County and saying he was going to harm FEMA workers. Criswell decided to pause door-to-door canvassing efforts in the area, which have since resumed.

"Frankly, it's heartbreaking to see words or acts of hatred toward anyone, let alone federal responders who are here to help people in this critical time. So let me be clear: I take these threats seriously and the safety of these responders is, and will remain, a priority for me and my team," Criswell said.

As of Tuesday morning, FEMA had approved more than 77,000 applications for its Individual Assistance program in the Helene-impacted counties, with survivors receiving more than \$99 million. More than 171,000 people have applied for aid, said Lucas Hitt, a FEMA spokesman.

Cooper pointed to the storm happening about a month before an election as a key reason for the volume of inaccurate and outright false information that has been spread about the storm and response.

"Candidates are using people's misery to sow chaos for their own political objectives, and it's wrong. This is a time where we all need to pull together to help the people of Western North Carolina and it's disappointing when candidates, knowing full well what they're doing, are continuing this kind of disinformation filled with lies," Cooper said Tuesday.

Disinformation is the intentional spread of false or misleading information, while misinformation is false information shared without intent.

Former President Donald Trump, the Republican nominee for president, has singled out Cooper, a Democrat, for criticism. Trump has amplified false claims that Cooper and President Joe Biden have "gone out of their way" to avoid sending aid to Helene-damaged parts of Western North Carolina that are more likely to vote Republican.

Trump has also falsely claimed that FEMA is only giving Helene survivors \$750 in assistance. The \$750 payment is an immediate, urgent payment to help people impacted by the storm meet daily needs like baby formula, food or gasoline. Even after people receive that payment, FEMA said, the agency will continue to consider eligibility for other funds.

Cooper also called out Mark Robinson, North Carolina's lieutenant governor and the Republican nominee in the governor's race. Immediately after Helene, Robinson started to claim that Cooper was failing the people of North Carolina, a claim he has repeated persistently as he's campaigned and helped organize a donation drive.

"He needs to stop it, and there are other people who need to stop this disinformation which is ending up hurting people who've lost everything," Cooper said.

North Carolina's Department of Public Safety has made law enforcement available to coordinate with officials on the ground, including FEMA employees and other volunteers who may be threatened, Cooper said.

People still missing

There are now 95 confirmed deaths from Tropical Storm Helene in North Carolina, N.C. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kody Kinsley said Tuesday.

The state has also formed a task force that will work with local law enforcement to review missing persons reports and see how many people are still unaccounted for after the storm. As of Tuesday, 92 people had been reported missing and have not been found, Cooper said.

"I want to caution that this is not a definitive count because the task force is continuing its work. The number will continue to fluctuate as more reports come in and others are resolved," Cooper said.

Cold weather coming

As temperatures have started to dip in Western North Carolina, the state is working to send cold-weather items like heaters, blankets and coats to the region.

In Buncombe County, a weather station at UNC-Asheville's campus recorded a 36-degree Fahrenheit temperature at 8 a.m. Tuesday. That the second time since Helene hit on Sept. 27 that the station has recorded a temperature below 40 degrees.

"We've seen a shift from the type of commodities that were the focus two weeks ago, kind of food and water, and are now moving into more of that cold-weather gear," said N.C. Emergency Management Director Will Ray, adding the state is working to fulfill those requests "as quickly as possible."

The state is working with the National Guard and Department of Transportation to make sure that people who have lost their homes are able to stay warm, Ray said. That also includes finding room in shelters or more stable temporary housing.

There are still 13 shelters open in Western North Carolina housing more than 500 people and 80 pets, Ray said.

About 4,600 people with storm-damaged homes are staying in hotels via FEMA's Transitional Sheltering Assistance program.

"We're trying to get every available option on the table to support those that have been impacted, particularly related to housing," Ray said.

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Gov. Cooper increases NC unemployment benefits after Helene. Here's what's available.

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Author: Avi Bajpai; Staff Writer | Section: Business | 631 Words

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RALEIGH Gov. Roy Cooper signed an executive order Wednesday increasing the maximum weekly unemployment payment available to North Carolinians in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

The executive order applies statewide and authorizes the current maximum weekly payment of \$350 to be raised to \$600.

The payments paid out by the state will continue to be capped at 12 weeks, but North Carolinians who lived or worked in the western counties that were impacted by the storm, and are out of work because of it, will qualify for up to 26 weeks of federal benefits that will be paid through the end of March.

In a statement, Cooper, a Democrat, said he was authorizing the raise in weekly unemployment benefits after traveling across Western North Carolina and hearing concern from small business owners about employees who were still unemployed because their businesses are still closed.

The executive order, which received unanimous agreement from the rest of the bipartisan Council of State, is tied to the ongoing state of emergency for Helene, and will stay in effect until the end of the emergency, or until the order is rescinded.

On top of raising the cap on weekly benefits to \$600, the executive order also increases benefits by \$250 per week, up to the \$600 maximum, to ensure that any low-income or part-time workers who were receiving less than the current \$350 maximum "receive necessary benefits in the wake of Helene," according to a news release from Cooper's office.

Cooper's office noted that even though federal law requires the increased benefits to apply statewide, 79% of new claims filed - 19,735 - between the storm hitting North Carolina on Sept. 27 and Oct. 13 were filed by workers in impacted counties.

The governor's office also noted that only eight other states have lower weekly maximum unemployment benefits after North Carolina, adding that the \$350 cap, which was set in 2013, had not been changed since, "even as rising wages in the state continue to grow North Carolina's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund from which benefits are paid."

The trust fund currently has more than \$4.8 billion, and is the second-largest of its kind in the country, the governor's office said.

The governor's office said that the Division of Employment Security estimated that if 50,000 North Carolinians from the impacted counties were to receive the maximum unemployment payment for the entire 12-week duration, it would cost the trust fund a total of \$150 million.

The additional 14 weeks of federal benefits available under the federal Disaster Unemployment Assistance program would cost the federal government an additional \$175 million, the governor's office said.

"Many currently unemployed workers will likely return to work before receiving the full benefit they are entitled to claim, so the actual fiscal impact of the increased benefits is expected to be lower," Cooper's office said in the release.

In a statement, State Treasurer Dale Folwell said he concurred with Cooper's executive order but suggested that officials should work to figure out where the increased benefits are most needed.

"While natural disasters are nothing new in North Carolina, they always present new opportunities to learn important lessons," Folwell said. "I recommend that the Governor, working with local, state and federal officials and agencies, resolve to more clearly define and identify areas that are most impacted by this and future disasters. That would assure that increased benefits and employer tax relief are provided to those in the greatest need."

"Hopefully, the U.S. Congress and the North Carolina General Assembly will take this opportunity to draft laws that will allow precision focus and immediate action to struggling disaster relief areas instead of extending response on a statewide basis," he said.

Cooper's office said Wednesday that it could take people filing for unemployment between two and three weeks to see the increased payments in their weekly benefit checks.

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NC journalist plays dual role in response - to Helene

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Author: Scott Fowler; Staff Writer | Section: News | 977 Words

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Many journalists have covered the damage that Hurricane Helene wrought in Western North Carolina when it devastated much of the area in late September.

Very few of them, though, have had to make the same sorts of choices that 25-year-old Moss Brennan has.

Brennan is the editor of the Watauga Democrat in Boone, where he supervises three other staff writers and several freelance photographers and also helps oversee the publication of four other neighboring community newspapers.

Meanwhile, Brennan also serves as a volunteer firefighter for two local rescue units in the Boone area - the Deep Gap Fire Department and the Watauga County Rescue Squad.

"I have my rescue hat and my journalism hat," Brennan, a 2021 graduate of Appalachian State, said in a phone interview. "And I try to keep them as separate as possible."

That has proved challenging over the past couple of weeks. Hurricane Helene caused mayhem all over Western North Carolina. Brennan found himself wanting to help in two disparate ways - getting important information to the public through the newspaper and its various social media platforms and literally helping to save lives as a first responder.

In the first few hours and days of the storm, as Helene downed trees, flooded rivers, provoked landslides, knocked out power and caused dozens of deaths in Western North Carolina, Brennan stuck mostly with his volunteer work on the rescue units. He participated in several swift-water rescues, helping get people and animals out of cars that were stuck in floodwaters or out of houses where the water had risen too high for a safe exit.

"On those swift-water calls," Brennan said, "I was part of rescuing 11 people and three dogs."

Then it came time to put out the newspaper - or actually multiple newspapers, since Brennan is also the executive editor of Mountain Times Publications. The company owns community newspapers in neighboring counties like Ashe and Avery, too. All of the publications combined - there are five of them altogether - have a staff of nine full-time journalists. Most of those reporters are in their 20s, Brennan said.

Brennan is most closely associated with the Watauga Democrat, which he reports for and edits each week and which prints once a week on Wednesdays. For the Oct. 2 edition, the first after Helene, Brennan wrote the top story on the front page and also took the 1A centerpiece photo.

The headline was stark: "DEVASTATION."

The newspaper decided to print close to a thousand extra copies of that edition, since so many places were without power and Wi-Fi. Brennan and the staff dropped off free copies of the newspapers at central distribution areas like community centers and fire departments.

"I went to one fire department and they said, 'This is the first news we've had since Friday (five days before),'"
Brennan said. "It just goes to show you that local journalism - and the printed paper - can still be very important."

Brennan grew up in Durham and attended high school at the Durham School of the Arts. He traveled 200 miles west

across North Carolina to go to college at Appalachian State, where he majored in journalism and at one point was editor-in-chief of The Appalachian, the student newspaper.

Before he had even finished college, the Watauga Democrat had offered him a full-time job as a reporter. Brennan jumped at it - this was during the COVID era and almost all of his classes were online. When the editor job at the newspaper came open, Brennan was first appointed as interim editor and then got the job permanently - at age 22 and only three months after his college graduation.

Shortly after that, Brennan had to report on a spate of fires in Deep Gap, which is an unincorporated area in Watauga County. He grew somewhat interested in the process of fighting fires during this reporting, as well as the people who do it.

"I had always been interested in helping people anyway," Brennan said. "That's kind of why I got into journalism, too - to tell people's stories and hopefully help them. And then the Deep Gap fire chief was like, 'Hey, if you want to come to one of our trainings, we have one on Tuesday night.'"

Curious, Brennan stopped by and was enthralled by the work. He lived only 10 minutes from the station. So he joined Deep Gap as a volunteer firefighter in January 2022. A few months later, he got trained as an emergency medical technician (EMT). By February 2023, he had also joined the Watauga County Rescue Squad, also as a volunteer. Since he was volunteering, Brennan could mostly pick and choose what calls he assisted on and make sure he had time for his reporting and editing.

"My journalism job is flexible enough that if I'm not in the middle of an interview or a deadline, I can typically leave work if it's a serious enough call," Brennan said. "I probably go on a couple of calls a week. The majority of calls are medical, but there is the occasional car crash or fire."

With input from his bosses, Brennan said he decided early on that he shouldn't and couldn't report on calls that he was working on as a first responder. Compartmentalization would be key.

As for Brennan himself, he was fortunate. He lost power for only three hours during Hurricane Helene. Wi-Fi has been a thornier issue. Brennan has filed some stories from McDonald's (this is an age-old reporting trick, since McDonald's are often open late and generally have reliable Wi-Fi).

As the rescue calls have slowed and Western North Carolina concentrates on recovery, Brennan has been more focused on the reporting side of his life lately. As for his long-term plans, he said: "I really don't know what the future holds. I just know that I love what I do right now - both the rescue side and the journalism side."

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They bought the town's oldest restaurant and renovated it. Then Helene destroyed it.

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Author: Melissa Oyler; Staff Writer Section: News 1666 Words

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Bakersville When the brand-new owners of Helen's Restaurant, Donna Stafford and her mom, Mary Stafford, posted a sneak peek of the Bakersville diner's remodel in July 2023 on Facebook, they couldn't have known that just over a year later, it would all be gone.

Of course they couldn't. None of us could.

Bakersville is a small town - population 1,757, per the 2020 census - in Western North Carolina. Its nickname is the "Gateway to Roan Mountain," and it is the county seat of Mitchell County.

The town has experienced flooding before - including the infamous Flood of 1977 and the Flood of 1998 - but it had never experienced anything like it would with the devastation of Hurricane Helene.

Decades of memories at Helen's Restaurant

There are only a few restaurants in Bakersville, and Helen's was its oldest.

In our first conversation, Donna couldn't remember which year it opened - she would have to look at the newspaper article framed on the restaurant's wall to confirm - and that's not an option anymore.

She then texted the daughter of the owners who sold her the restaurant (yes, Helen's daughter), who confirmed the restaurant opened in 1956. The Mitchell County Historical Society said it started as a drive-in.

Helen Hopson, along with her husband, Wiley, owned and operated the restaurant from 1961 until she died in 1996. It was a town fixture for decades - and for a time, it was the only eatery in town, Donna said.

Helen's sits along NC-226, one of those winding mountain roads surrounded by lush green fields, houses on hills and peaks off in the distance. Take a left at the flashing light in downtown if you're coming in from Spruce Pine, then you've found it - it's on your left.

Behind the restaurant, a walking path runs along Cane Creek, which feeds into North Toe River. It's part of the town's Creekwalk project, which also includes a playground, sports fields and more.

Renovating a relic

Donna and Mary purchased Helen's Restaurant in 2023, then got to work.

"We completely remodeled the restaurant with focus on maintaining a cozy, small-town community vibe, keeping the counter barstools," Donna said.

They were putting in 16-hour days. Mary is 80. And Donna, who is 60, became ill just before the restaurant's reopening. She was diagnosed with Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, Lyme disease, meningitis, Bell's palsy, myocarditis and other co-infections.

But all the labor felt worth it. The Stafford family goes back several generations in Mitchell County. Donna was born here; her brothers, too. It wasn't just the town's legacy they were investing in - it was personal.

Helen's reopened in August 2023

With the community cheerleading their efforts the whole way, they reopened the restaurant in August 2023. A Rhododendron Dining Room with a collage wall celebrated Bakersville's annual Rhododendron Festival. A black bear on a clock proclaimed the restaurant was "on mountain time." Joe Cole, a Mitchell County native who worked at Helen's in 1965, gifted the restaurant a signed dulcimer that he made using locally sourced wood.

For the next 13+ months, the restaurant served up hearty meals, including impressively sized double cheeseburgers, hot ham and cheese sandwiches and Southern chopped steak. Breakfast was available on the weekends, and Saturdays were for live music.

At times, Helen's needed to close unexpectedly due to staff illness, including Donna's. These short-notice closings were posted to the restaurant's Facebook page, and customers would comment with well wishes and shares, getting the word out.

"We were just past our first year of operations and were not making a profit yet, putting every dime towards salaries and food vendors," Donna said.

The week of the hurricane

On Wednesday, Sept. 25, a powerful storm came through. "The basement flooded like never before," Donna said.

Photos of the damage show freezers knocked on their sides, food spilled out and covered in sludge. A crumpled cardboard container in a puddle on the floor of the basement displays "KEEP FROZEN" in block letters under a layer of cracked mud. Fresh broccoli florets in bags surround other food, including a bread-and-butter pickles jar. Boxes lie everywhere, mud lines are on the walls and splattered on the side of the stairs. A mop bucket has surrendered, turned on its side and coated in the slushy mess.

The basement flooded 4-5 feet that day, Donna said. "We obliviously closed Thursday and spent the day throwing away the lost food and scooping out as much water and mud as possible."

When she went to bed Thursday night, she knew Helene was on its way, and she figured there would be more flooding. "I was exhausted and already devastated from our losses from Wednesday's storm."

She pulled up her restaurant security cameras from home, where she watched helplessly as the basement flooded, again. She watched her freezers fall over, again. The outside cameras showed the water even higher than Wednesday.

She watched until she couldn't watch anymore - until 5:30 a.m. Friday, Sept. 27, when her power went out.

Then Hurricane Helene arrived.

Hurricane Helene

Hurricane Helene was particularly hard on Bakersville. Roads were decimated. Tornadoes ripped through the area. Flash floods destroyed everything the water could reach. The park was demolished and so were the playground and soccer fields. Downtown was completely flooded, along with the businesses there.

And Donna was trapped in her home, which had also been damaged in the storm. "I had no way of getting my car out and no means of communication."

Three days later, her brother was able to make his way to her. He had stopped to check on the restaurant and showed her photos of its damage. A wall of the restaurant's lower level was gone, along with six freezers, all the

food, a washer/dryer and a walk-in cooler.

Even the supports holding up the two-story building were gone.

Three days after that, Donna was finally able to get her car out and go see her businesses - and her town - for herself.

"It was shocking. It still is. My shock set in even before I arrived at the restaurant. Roads are gone, forests are no longer forests as trees are all lying down in a tangled mess. Electricity poles are broken in half and lying on top of what is left of homes, buildings and roads."

And without its support beams, the restaurant's building could collapse at any time.

On Oct. 5, Helen's Restaurant was officially condemned. "We are no longer allowed to enter the building. Praying for us all," the Staffords wrote on Facebook.

Donna said inspectors told her she will never be allowed inside again - it's not safe. That means the newspaper article about Helen's and its opening date will forever hang on the wall, but with no more diners to read it while waiting for their orders of biscuits & gravy or chicken & dumplings.

Donna's nephew started a Go Fund Me campaign for the Stafford women, asking for a modest \$5,000 to help them recoup just a tiny bit of their life savings, which they had poured into the restaurant renovation just a little over a year ago. "Hopefully in the future, they will be able to rebuild but unfortunately it will not be in this same building," her nephew wrote.

Some of the town's other local restaurants were also damaged or closed temporarily due to lack of power and water, including Mammie's Breakfast Barn and Southern Ridge Cafe. Bonnie & Clyde's, which has been open since the 1970s and is also on NC-226 closer to North Toe River, experienced flooding. "The restaurant is still standing; however, the cleanup needed is overwhelming," its Go Fund Me campaign stated.

What happens next at Helen's Restaurant?

The truth is, Donna told us doesn't know what will happen next.

If she gets anything from insurance, she told us it may only be enough to pay off her mortgage, she said.

But even if she could rebuild Helen's Restaurant, it could not be on the same property, she said. What would that look like? She would need funds to buy land, build a new restaurant, purchase new equipment, replace lost food ...

And on top of all of the damage: "I am very ill so not sure how the future looks."

Right now, Donna is spending her days trying to cope with the day-to-day tasks that Helene made difficult, including figuring out a massive amount of paperwork, all while battling her illnesses. She had no power, water or internet until a few days ago. She communicated with CharlotteFive from the fire department or a showering and laundry facility.

"There are times when I begin to let anxiety reach onto my soul," she said. "How am I going to survive financially? I can't work a normal job somewhere else now because I'm bedridden some days and won't be able to show up for another job. How will I get my medications? How will I pay for my doctor appointments? How will I pay my rent, electric, Wi-Fi, phone, car insurance, gas or food?

But right now, the neighbors, like in all of the small towns across Western North Carolina, are taking care of each other. On week one, a woman who was new to the area walked up to Donna's house to check on her, which is how they met for the first time. They became fast friends.

This is a community, among many other communities, that have lost so much.

And in Bakersville, North Carolina, one of those permanent losses may ultimately end up being the 68-year-old restaurant.

"But then I pray and am reminded of the losses that are so much greater than mine. Loss of life. One of my employee's grandfathers was swept away," she said. He didn't make it.

"Another employee's parent's house was washed away, and she and her parents are sleeping in a tent. So many in the community lost lives and so many more are still missing."

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Helene wrecked their Western NC towns and homes. Then came the bees and fire ants

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An additional struggle to western North Carolina's Hurricane Helene recovery involves an increase in stinging insects like bees, yellow jackets and fire ants. That has had led state health authorities to make a large purchase of allergy medications.

The N.C. Department of Health and Human Services does not track reports of people who have been stung or bitten by insects. But the agency has had "anecdotal reports of increased numbers of stinging insects in the affected areas of western North Carolina," spokeswoman Summer Tonizzo told The Charlotte Observer Tuesday by email.

"We have made a large purchase of epi-pens and Benadryl," the state health agency said in a statement to The Charlotte Observer late Monday.

The state did not say how much it was spending on that purchase. A state Health Department official was not made available for an interview.

The medication is being distributed to EMS and disaster relief agencies, hospitals and shelter operators.

Helene hit North Carolina on Sept. 26 causing landslides and flooding leaving mass destruction with 27 counties designated as major disaster areas. Gov. Roy Cooper said Tuesday there were 95 confirmed deaths and 92 people still missing.

NC medical orders and waivers

On Friday, State Health Director Betsey Tilson issued a standing order authorizing pharmacists licensed or practicing in North Carolina an emergency waiver to dispense epinephrine auto-injectors for treatment of allergic reactions to stinging and biting insects, and other allergens, according to the NC Board of Pharmacy's website.

The requests can be made from people with allergies, a caregiver, family member or friend of a person at risk of experiencing or having a history of an anaphylactic reaction.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also activated the Emergency Prescription Assistance Program to help uninsured residents replace lost medications or medical equipment because of the storm.

More contact with insects

Many of the reported insect stings were from electricians and other outdoor workers, according to the Associated Press.

"If your habitat was disturbed, you're going to go out and look for more places to live," said Sarah Stellwagen, assistant professor of biological sciences at UNC Charlotte with a background in entomology.

As for yellow jackets, they can be easily disturbed if someone walks across their ground nest.

"As people are out there moving debris around and getting their property back in order, I think they're probably coming in contact with these things more than they normally would," Stellwagen said.

People also may be around bugs more regularly because they're living without power and spending more time outside, or because of structural damage, homes may not sealed off.

More about stinging insects

Insects, just like squirrels and other animals, also are preparing for winter so there's more competition for food. "There's lots of (insects) cleaning up the organic material as well," Stellwagen said, such as waste and rot after the flood.

She suggested wearing bug spray and watch for nests during cleanup in the mountains. And this time, Mother Nature may be helpful.

"Because it's getting cooler, I think people will start seeing some relief from these things for sure," Stellwagen said, "particularly when we get some regular frosts."

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How many people has Tropical Storm Helene killed in NC? How many remain missing?

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Tropical Storm Helene has caused 95 confirmed deaths in North Carolina, Gov. Roy Cooper said at a Tuesday press conference. And almost as many, 92, remain missing.

Buncombe County has had the most Helene-related deaths, with 42. Yancey County has had 11 confirmed deaths; Henderson County has had seven; and Haywood County has had five, the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services said Tuesday.

"The vast majority of these are directly related to flooding leading to landslides, blunt force, flooded cars, etc. We are still going through the detailed review of death records on other specific causes and elements," DHHS Secretary Kody Kinsley said.

Drowning is the leading cause of death, with 20. That's followed by landslides and blunt force injuries, each of which are confirmed to have killed 11 people, and trauma from wind or tree, which killed six people, according to DHHS.

The state has established a task force that is working with local law enforcement officials to investigate cases of people who are still unaccounted for.

As part of that effort, the N.C. Department of Public Safety is working to consolidate reports about missing people that may have come into a number of state, local or nonprofit agencies.

Working with local agencies, state officials are following up with people who reported a missing person to see if that person has been located.

Cooper warned that the number of people missing is likely to fluctuate, with people being both added and removed as more cases are uncovered or resolved.

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Boone still recovering post-Helene, but fall visitors welcome

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As Western North Carolina recovers from the devastation of Hurricane Helene, many restaurants and small businesses who rely on tourism dollars during the fall foliage travel season are struggling.

While major roadwork will be underway for the foreseeable future and the North Carolina Department of Transportation has called for essential travel only in the region, some towns are now accessible and cautiously welcoming back travelers.

We're taking a look at various Western North Carolina towns to consider visiting with safety in mind, as well as support for those who rely on tourism for their livelihoods.

Here is what you need to know about traveling to Boone in the near future.

Is travel to Boone safe?

While Boone remains under a state of emergency declaration, the town is also finding some return to normalcy, too. Appalachian State University has resumed classes, and visitors are slowly beginning to return.

David Jackson, president and CEO of the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce, said via Instagram that as those visitors make their way to Boone, they should be mindful of the destruction that took place.

"As we continue the careful return of students and visitors to our area over the days and weeks ahead, it is important to understand that you aren't coming back to the same community you saw just a few weeks ago," Jackson said.

"While some areas have restored their infrastructure and ability to operate quickly, other areas throughout Watauga County and the High Country region are still deeply involved in recovery efforts, and will be for quite some time."

Jackson added, "Please be respectful and pack plenty of grace and patience," in a similar statement on the Boone area Chamber of Commerce website.

How to get to Boone

Boone is accessible from Charlotte via I-85 North to U.S. 321 North, as well as via I-77 North to U.S. 421 North. From Raleigh or Durham, take I-40 West to U.S. 421 North. (Note: I-40 West is indefinitely closed past the Maggie Valley interchange, but traffic flowing east from Asheville has reopened.)

Main roadways, including U.S. 421 South/W. King Street in downtown Boone, are open for travel.

Many secondary roads are undergoing repairs, and lane closures and detours remain in place, especially along NC Hwy 105 and U.S. Hwy 421 North toward the Tennessee line. Stay on primary routes and follow posted advisories.

Can I stay in Boone?

Many hotels and lodging facilities are filled with displaced families, aid workers and repair crews. Explore Boone

recommends visitors consider making a day trip to support local shops, restaurants and businesses, adding: "Thank you for your understanding and for helping us prioritize those most in need."

What restaurants are open in Boone?

Restaurants in Boone may be operating on limited hours and menus. Here are a few local spots to check out:

Betty's Biscuits

Location: 640 West King Street, Boone, NC 28604

Betty's Biscuits serves up savory and sweet biscuits, plus bowls and plates, using ingredients from local farms and purveyors. Its biscuits can also be ordered by the dozen - with jam, butter or gravy - packed up in boxes to go. For now, hours are 9 a.m.-noon with a limited menu. Gift cards and store merchandise are available online, too.

Black Cat Burrito

Location: 127 S. Depot St., Boone, NC 28607

Black Cat Burrito has resumed normal hours and is open in downtown Boone from Tuesday-Saturday, 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m. Of course, you'll find a variety of burritos there. (It is in the name, after all.) But there are also tacos, enchiladas, loaded fries and salad.

F.A.R.M. Cafe

Location: 617 W King St, Boone, NC 28607

In addition to making meals to donate to community members, F.A.R.M. Cafe is open for lunch Monday-Friday, 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Items on the menu include breakfast burritos, soups, salads and desserts. Vegetarian, vegan, glutenfree, dairy-free and nut-free options are available.

Gamekeeper

Location: 3005 Shulls Mill Rd, Boone, NC 28607

Gamekeeper, a fine dining restaurant in the mountains between Boone and Blowing Rock, has reopened for dinner service Wednesday-Sunday from 5-9 p.m. Reservations are required for its "adventurous" menu, which includes emu, duck, elk and bison. You'll also want to take note that valet parking is offered, as the driveway and parking lots are steep and can be difficult to access. Gift cards are also available.

Melanie's Food Fantasy

Location: 664 W King St, Boone, NC 28607

For now, Melanie's Food Fantasy is open from 9 a.m.-2 p.m. daily. Customers can purchase gift cards at the cafe that will help fund the restaurant's free meals for the community. Melanie's calls its vegan-friendly menu "eclectic," and its meals include pimento cheese grits, a tempeh scramble, corned beef hash and more.

Troy's 105 Diner

Location: 1286 Highway 105, Boone, NC, 28607

Troy's 105 Diner offers breakfast all day, along with house-made soups, thick burgers, comfort food platters and a variety of salads. Daily specials and a whole lineup of desserts are among the selections. It's open Sunday-Tuesday,

7 a.m.-3 p.m., and Wednesday-Saturday, 7 a.m.-8 p.m.

Important information for Boone travelers

Here are need-to-know points for visiting Boone and the surrounding area:

A curfew from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. is in effect in Watauga County.

The Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina is indefinitely closed for all uses, including foot and bike traffic.

North Carolina State Parks, including Elk Knob State Park and Grandfather Mountain State Park, will be closed through at least Oct. 31. Hiking on Boone-area trails outside of these areas is not recommended for safety reasons, Explore Boone has said.

[STATE PARKS UPDATES: 13 state parks closed in Western NC after Hurricane Helene. Estimated reopening timeline.]

Resources to check before you go

Storm cleanup is an ever-changing situation, so make sure to get the most up-to-date information you can before you head out.

Explore Boone

Town of Boone

North Carolina Department of Transportation

Heidi Finley: @HWhiteFinley
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Living in the dark: 13+ days without power in Western North Carolina after Hurricane Helene

October 18, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Sara Murphy; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1428 Words

Page: 15A OpenURL Link

Editor's note: After Sara filed this story but before it was published, her power came back on after being off for 13 days. The last section has been added to reflect that.

I've lived in Leicester, an unincorporated township northwest of Asheville, with my elderly mother and stepfather since 2014. It's a lovely area with lovely people, and our mountain home has the most beautiful view I've ever seen.

Compared to most areas, Leicester made it through the storm pretty well. (In my first story for CharlotteFive, I reported on a local diner, the Salty Goat Grill, keeping folks fed since the storm hit.) Lots of downed trees, and some damage to roads. But as far as I know, we escaped the worst. We are truly lucky.

But we also have been without power, water and internet for 13 days in our neighborhood of about 15 homes, and managing everyday tasks with two elderly parents and two cats gets a bit harder each day.

After Helene: Hand washing and toilet flushing with no water

It's amazing how much longer it takes to accomplish the most basic of tasks. Each day, we drive five minutes down our winding mountain road to the creek to fill multiple laundry detergent bottles with water for hand washing and toilet flushing. Our semi-rural neighborhood did not experience any flooding, so while I wouldn't drink that water without boiling it, it works just fine for those other needs.

The flushing is particularly challenging if you're elderly and have less upper body strength. Whether you're pouring the water straight into the bowl to create a vacuum or pouring it into the tank so you can flush, it's impossible for my elderly mother. This has been a serious issue in senior living facilities around the region, as reported by volunteers of multiple "flush brigades."

Coffee and cooking with no water or power

Even making coffee feels more complicated. Or perhaps it's just the realization that you're boiling water on the stove for a drab cup of instant rather than a cup of nicely percolated grounds that makes the task feel both more necessary and less fulfilling.

We're lucky to have a gas stove, but cooking has its limits when you know you don't have the ability to wash the dishes as well as you'd like. We're paper plating and plastic forking everything that we can, but hot meals require pots and pans, and the dirty ones are piling up.

Unlike many areas, we haven't had too much of a challenge getting food or - most importantly - drinking water. But the selection has narrowed significantly, given that our freezer is "powered" by four bags of steadily liquefying ice. (Ice has been in short supply at our local grocery store, even when rationed to two bags per family.)

The freezer mostly holds frozen butter and some egg whites now, while we have a smaller styrofoam cooler to hold more quasi-perishable items like smoked salmon, long defrosted peas, and some feta and provolone. Bread with peanut butter features heavily on the menu, though tonight we're having some broccoli and carrots steamed on the stove to go along with potatoes baked on the grill.

No electricity: Awake with the sun, asleep with the sun

Your world shrinks in times like these. Not only because you stop using the rooms in your house that rely on electricity to fully light up, but also because your days run on the natural clock of the sun.

It's completely dark by around 8 p.m. most nights, and our camping lantern, small flashlights and candles don't provide enough light to do even the lightest of chores or indulge in some bedtime reading. And, of course, even with cell service, we can't waste batteries on our devices.

How to work in the dark

One benefit is that I worked more efficiently this fortnight. Whether conducting interviews or writing articles, I don't get distracted going down internet rabbit holes or get precious over each word.

That said, however, when I interviewed two people in Morganton about their volunteer efforts, those conversations stretched for a long time. I could tell they needed to share, and I could think of no better use of my phone battery than to listen.

We each of us have a book's worth of tales to tell about surviving this experience, whether we barely lost power or had our homes washed away.

Neighbors helping neighbors in Helene's wake

Without our neighbors and their generators, we'd be up the creek. We've charged devices daily, used their Starlink satellite on that first weekend when cell service failed and even taken a hot shower. We'll be forever grateful. A generator will be our first major purchase once we have some normalcy restored.

After a few days where gas was in short supply and people waited for hours in line, we've been able to fill up easily. It's nice to know that, in a pinch, we could drive off somewhere. But where would we go? No place is like home, and I live in semi-hope that the power is coming soon.

I'm not holding my breath, though; earlier this week a chainsaw crew finally came to remove fallen tree branches that have rested almost jauntily against our power lines, and someone tightened the lines.

But that was a few days ago. A crew came again out Wednesday morning, but it was simply another tree trimming crew. Multiple calls to Duke Energy insist that a power restoration crew was dispatched, but it's clear a communication breakdown is happening.

And while I can hang on despite the cooler weather up here on the mountaintop, I can increasingly see the strain on my mother. In the starkest terms, this experience will likely shorten her life. Perhaps by only days or weeks, but it's still heartbreaking.

In your worst moments it's easy to feel forgotten by the rest of the world as they bake and scroll on Instagram, while you spread yet another slice of bread with peanut butter or lug the flush bottle toward the bathroom. (Also as my mom just puts her noodles in the microwave and forgets it's not working.)

All the same, despite some shortened tempers and real fatigue, I think we've hung in there pretty well. My heart goes out to those people who don't even have a home to navigate, much less the anticipation of power or water anytime this month.

I'm currently needed here at home, but once our oxygen mask is back on in the form of the magical innovation of electricity, I'll be doing what I can to help others get out of the dark and back on their feet next.

Update: Back online after 13 days

When the power returned early on the evening of Oct. 9, it did so not with a bang but with gentle hums and beeps. For the first 10 minutes or so, I wandered the house, not quite trusting in our good fortune.

It took my stepfather turning on the taps and flushing the toilets to drive home just what it meant. "Is anyone else in a bit of disbelief, almost like a caged animal set free and too afraid to trust the grass?" I wrote in our neighborhood group chat.

About half an hour later, though, we began to roar back to life ourselves. I turned on our Wi-Fi router and got a signal. In our excitement to clean dishes, we forgot to switch on the right valve and had a water supply error message.

In the two days following, we've done about 10 loads of laundry, five dishwasher cycles and cleaned every shelf in the fridge, which currently has a skeleton crew of food: a giant vat of vegetable soup, butter and condiments, a bit of cheese and about a case of bottled water. Having not just power but clean, reliable well water is a true gift; most municipal water systems in the region will be under boil advisories for a while. The irony that it was an overabundance of water that has deprived us of this most precious resource has not escaped me.

Now that we're not in rapid response mode, the exhaustion has hit; I've taken more naps in the past two days than I did in the 13 before them.

It will take a while for a normal routine to return, even in our relatively unscathed household.

But once I recharge my batteries (and buy a major battery pack that can charge multiple devices for days at a time), I'll be ready to help recover and rebuild.

Sara Murphy: @saramurphyphd

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Where to safely see the fall leaves in Western NC

October 18, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Mae Lackey; Staff Writer | Section: Living | 1079 Words

Page: 1C OpenURL Link

For Western North Carolina, October is typically prime "leaf season," when visitors flock to see the vibrant transformation of fall foliage into warm, striking hues.

Two weeks ago, however, Hurricane Helene devastated the region - destroying homes, closing schools and roads, and leaving thousands without power or cell service.

Many spots that would normally see a surge of tourists this time of year are not only recovering from the storm's aftermath but are also struggling due to the drop in visitors.

North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper told the Asheville Citizen-Times on Oct. 3 that tourists are not welcome in Western North Carolina, and he only wants dedicated response efforts coming into the region.

A Visit North Carolina advisory warns against coming to the area, citing continued risks of "landslides, slope failures, downed trees and road closures."

And on Wednesday, Oct. 9, NC Department of Transportation Secretary Joey Hopkins said 600 roads remain closed in the area, The News & Observer reported. "Non-essential traffic is hindering our efforts to get roads opened back up. Crews are having to stop work to allow traffic to pass through damaged areas. To help us get roads open, cleared and open as fast as possible, we again ask that traffic use alternative routes," he said.

To safely reach the towns that are unaffected and cautiously welcoming visitors, it might mean driving a long way around in some cases.

[13 state parks closed in Western NC after Hurricane Helene. Estimated reopening timeline.]

How to get there: Traditionally, people traveling from the eastern part of the state could take Interstate 40 to many of these places. But with I-40 closed after Helene, that's not an option. It's also best to avoid taking local roads that are too close to the damaged towns - save those roads for local traffic, people bringing in aid and emergency care.

NCDOT has posted a detour map you can consult when planning your route. Drivenc.gov has road closures listed as well, but be mindful that some of the impacted areas may not have been able to report.

The bottom line: Be smart, and respectful of work crews. But if you've found a way to travel there safely, here are a few places that have indicated they're ready for visitors.

Blowing Rock, NC

Just this week, Blowing Rock invited visitors to return, although on Friday, Oct. 11, a curfew remained from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. Tweetsie Railroad remains closed. For those looking for a quaint tourist destination, Blowing Rock offers farms, wineries, a resort, spas, museums and more. Although the majority of the Blue Ridge Parkway will remain closed for the foreseeable future (check updates with the National Park Service), the town's positioning on the crown of the mountains still leaves visitors surrounded by the gorgeous, colorful foliage.

Far Western NC in the Smoky Mountains, including Bryson City, was primarily spared by Hurricane Helene. Within Bryson City is the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which is the most visited national park in the nation and is also a great option for seeing a spectacular display of colorful fall leaves. The town touts that its "shops, lodging, restaurants and attractions showcase the best of the Smokies." The fall color display usually reaches peak at mid and lower elevations between mid-October and early November, so there's plenty of time to plan your leaf-peeping adventure. Aside from leaves, Bryson City offers a variety of outdoor and indoor attractions such as train excursions, mountain biking, museums and more.

Cashiers, NC

Lauding itself as a "vacation paradise," Cashiers is another great destination to consider for those seeking a beautiful display of this fall's leaf colors. The town is open and eager to serve visitors. While some nearby attractions remain closed, plenty of beloved natural areas are open for visitors. The town is lush with fall foliage, so no need to worry whether you'll catch a glimpse of the leaves. If you visit, be sure to check out the community's farmers market, antique shops and boutiques. Cashiers also offers a 13-acre park called The Village Green that holds a variety of events. This weekend, from Oct. 11-13, the park will hold the Cashiers Valley Leaf festival.

Cherokee, NC

Cherokee is another great destination for enjoying the beauty of the Great Smoky Mountains, and the area is welcoming visitors. This town is home to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, who make their home on the 56,600-acre Qualla Boundary in five Western North Carolina counties. Rich with culture, Cherokee has plenty to offer for those who enjoy art and history. The array of colors will be visible throughout the town as it's surrounded by natural beauty - Visit Cherokee has even put together a list of the best spots for viewing the fall foliage. Whether you're looking to enjoy the Oconaluftee Indian Village, hiking, elk viewing, fishing or golf, Cherokee's list of fun things to do is certainly expansive.

Highlands, NC

The quaint mountain town of Highlands, known for its upscale charm and breathtaking mountain views, is a prime spot for leaf-peeping this fall. The town is back open for business after the storm, according to a message from the mayor on the town's website. Highlands is a great home base for exploring the nearby Nantahala National Forest's beauty while also enjoying the town's relaxed, mountain vibe, complete with plenty of outdoor activities and a killer downtown shopping area. Nantahala Forest reopened for visitors on Friday, Oct. 11, offering access to some of the best views in the region. The forest bursts into shades of red, orange, and yellow during peak season, and its trails and overlooks make it perfect for a day of hiking or simply taking in the scenery.

Sylva, NC

Sylva located within Jackson County, is open for visitors. The town is located in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the town is surrounded by plenty of trees and foliage for all of your leaf-viewing needs. Its proximity to both the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Nantahala National forest make it a great home base for leaf-peeping visitors. Sylva also offers the Pinnacle Park Trail and the Jackson County Greenway, so plenty of outdoor activities are still possible. As for indoor activities, shopping, dining, museums and events are all plentiful in charming Sylva.

Other Western North Carolina areas are open

Other towns that are open and welcoming visitors include Boone (which advises sticking to the main roads and is still under a curfew of 11 p.m. to 7 a.m.), Murphy, West Jefferson and more. Check out highcountryhost.com for updates.

Mae Lackey: @maeglackey

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Trapped dog saved from Helene flooding 'just in time,' NC shelter says. 'True bravery'

October 18, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (NC) Author: Simone Jasper, The Charlotte Observer | Section: north_carolina | 311 Words OpenURL Link

A trapped dog was saved from Hurricane Helene's rising floodwaters "just in time," a North Carolina shelter said.

"Gandolf was left behind," Brother Wolf Animal Rescue wrote Oct. 17 on Facebook. "Trapped in an outdoor kennel. The place he lived his entire life. A small world now quickly becoming a nightmare. We can't imagine how frightened he was as floodwaters hit his chest."

Gandolf was in the scary predicament as Hurricane Helene hit Western North Carolina in late September. The deadly storm battered the mountainous region with devastating flooding and wind damage.

"A kind person couldn't stop thinking about him, outside alone in the hurricane," the Asheville shelter wrote. "The water rising by the second, something generations had never seen."

1018-dogrescuencembed

Then, "in an act of true bravery," the person set out to save Gandolf from being swept away.

"Climbing over debris and risking personal safety — for a dog that wasn't theirs," the rescue wrote. "They got to him just in time. He was now safe, but he was sick and needed medical care."

As Gandolf got a fresh start, the shelter said it gave him free veterinary attention. Now, the family who helped Gandolf plans to keep him, the shelter wrote on Facebook and told McClatchy News in an email.

Brother Wolf spokesperson Brooke Fornea said the shelter couldn't "share additional information on the rescue or specific medical care for privacy reasons — because (Gandolf) is not in our care or ownership umbrella."

The shelter in past social media posts said its buildings sustained damage from "raging" floodwaters during the storm. Several animals have been transported out of the shelter as the organization plans to rebuild in Western North Carolina.

Dog wandered NC after devastation of Helene. Then came the 'kindness of strangers'

Family 'watched in horror' as Helene swept their cat away. Then son heard a meow

'Resilient' kitten rescued from devastation of Helene. 'Little survivor' needs a home Copyright (c) 2024 The Charlotte Observer

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'Heartbroken' family surrendered 'loving' cats after Helene. Now, they have new home

October 18, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (NC) Author: Simone Jasper, The Charlotte Observer | Section: north_carolina | 398 Words OpenURL Link

UPDATE: On Oct. 20, a North Carolina shelter shared the heartwarming news that the three cats were adopted into the same home. Their previous family had to give them up after Hurricane Helene.

"In the face of devastation, there is always hope — and today, hope won," the Humane Society of Catawba County wrote in a Facebook post.

The original story is below.

A "heartbroken" family was forced to surrender their "loving" cats after Hurricane Helene devastated Western North Carolina.

Now, an animal shelter hopes the trio of cats won't be separated.

"Let's give these three beautiful souls a chance to stay together and be loved for the rest of their lives," the Humane Society of Catawba County wrote Oct. 16 in a Facebook post.

The cats' journey to the shelter started in late September, when Hurricane Helene hit the North Carolina mountains. The deadly storm ravaged the area with wind damage and catastrophic flooding, leaving the cats' owners with a difficult decision to make.

"Their home was damaged, and after exhausting efforts to find a shelter that could take all three, they were heartbroken to surrender them to the shelter," the humane society wrote. "These boys have been together since they were kittens, and breaking their bond was unimaginable."

1018-threecatsncembed

The 3-year-old cats — named Big O, AKU and Courage — are described as "sweet" and "affectionate." While they have a close relationship, AKU has shown more independence and nervousness.

"They do love being around each other and AKU/Courage depend on other cats to be confident," Kaitlyn Ewing, the shelter's director of intake, rescue and foster coordination, told McClatchy News in an email. "Big O is the most outgoing."

The cats aren't required to go into the same home, but the humane society would prefer they stick together.

As of Oct. 18, the shelter's website listed all three cats as available for adoption at its facility in Hickory, a roughly 50-mile drive northwest from Charlotte. Details about the animal organization's adoption process can be found at catawbahumane.org.

"Big O, AKU, and Courage are the sweetest, most loving cats — because we all know orange kitties are AMAZING," the shelter wrote. "What would be even more amazing is finding a forever home where these boys can continue their lives together, just as they've always been."

Family 'watched in horror' as Helene swept their cat away. Then son heard a meow

'Resilient' kitten rescued from devastation of Helene. 'Little survivor' needs a home

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What's open and safe to do in Blowing Rock after Hurricane Helene hit Western North Carolina?

October 18, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (NC) Author: Melissa Oyler, The Charlotte Observer | Section: c5_travel | 722 Words OpenURL Link

As Hurricane Helene barreled through Western North Carolina, Blowing Rock was affected but says it was fortunate: None of its downtown infrastructure was destroyed. Water, power and internet are restored, and major highways are open and safe to travel.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation continues to advise caution when traveling to or near affected areas. It's important to keep the roads clear for local traffic and other essential travel.

But some places, including Blowing Rock, are inviting visitors to return for the season and see the fall leaves from its scenic places. Some of the higher elevations have no leaves after Helene, but lower elevations have some good fall color, meteorologist Brad Panovich reported on Sunday, Oct. 20. A WCNC map shows Blowing Rock's color to be in the low/moderate range. It's at an elevation of 3,566 feet.

We're doing a series on Western North Carolina towns to consider visiting this season. If you're able to get there safely and be mindful of restrictions, your tourism dollars could help support those who need it. Browse our other guides to post-hurricane traveling here:

Beech MountainBooneBrevardCherokeeHendersonville

Today, here is what you need to know about traveling to Blowing Rock in the near future.

Is travel to Blowing Rock safe?

Major roads into Blowing Rock are open and safe for travel, Blowing Rock says. Many secondary roads are under repair. NCDOT has posted a detour map; check frequently for updates. Drivenc.gov also has road closures listed as well. Be mindful of lagging updates.

How to get to Blowing Rock

Blowing Rock is accessible from Charlotte via I-85 South to U.S. 321 North.From Raleigh or Durham, take I-40 West to U.S. 421 North, then to U.S. 321. (Note: I-40 West is indefinitely closed past the Maggie Valley interchange, but traffic flowing east from Asheville has reopened.)

Can I stay in Blowing Rock?

Many hotels and lodging facilities are filled with displaced families, aid workers and repair crews. If your favorite place is booked, Blowing Rock has available lodging listed on its website. Before you head out, check with your host for any information about secondary roads under repair. Consider a day trip to Blowing Rock if you're unable to secure lodging.

What restaurants are open in Blowing Rock?

Blowing Rock has a list of local restaurants and shops in town that are open and need our tourism support. If you can't visit in person right now, purchasing a gift card will help a restaurant's cash flow, the town says. Here are a few eateries to check out:

Bistro Roca

Location: 143 Wonderland Trail, Blowing Rock, NC 28605

Bistro Roca reopened in early October and is operating under regular hours. It is also feeding uniformed first responders for free. The restaurant serves meals with locally sourced ingredients, including wood-fired pizzas, burgers, lobster rolls and more. Gift cards can be purchased online.

Restaurant at Gideon Ridge Inn

Location: 202 Gideon Ridge Ln, Blowing Rock, NC 28605

Restaurant at Gideon Ridge Inn has now fully reopened, serving meals including prime beef tenderloin, red snapper and red sirloin. The restaurant is helping the relief efforts of St. Mary of the Hills Episcopal Church. Restaurant gift cards are available online.

The Speckled Trout

Location: 922 Main St, Blowing Rock, NC 28605

The Speckled Trout has reopened and is operating under regular hours. The restaurant and bottle shop serves cilantro trout nachos, blackened and grilled New York Strip, grain bowls and more. It is supporting relief efforts through The Build For Good Foundation. Restaurant gift cards are available for purchase, as well.

Timberlakes at Chelota Resort

Location: 185 Chetola Lake Dr, Blowing Rock, NC 28605

Timberlake's Restaurant is located in the historical Manor House at Chetola Resort. It serves seasonally-available menu items, and its current menu includes ribeye, shrimp & grits and vegan crabcakes.

TIMBER_2.JPGIn this file photo, a visitor enjoys the overlook at May View in Blowing Rock.

Important information for Blowing Rock travelers

Here are need-to-know points for visiting Blowing Rock and the surrounding area:

Hurricane Helene damaged the Blue Ridge Parkway, and much of it remains closed until repairs can be made.Local state parks and many local trails remain closed. The Blowing Rock landmark has reopened.Tweetsie Railroad is closed for the season.

Resources to check before you go

Storm cleanup is an ever-changing situation, so make sure to get the most up-to-date information you can before you head out.

Blowing Rock, NCThe Blowing RockNorth Carolina Department of TransportationVisitNC.com

GettyImages-462088345.jpgBlowing Rock in Western North Carolina is welcoming visitors to return after Hurricane Helene.

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Protesters tell NC Gov. Roy Cooper, Chief Justice: Protect Western NC renters after Helene

October 18, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (NC) Author: Ryan Oehrli, The Charlotte Observer Section: north_carolina 273 Words OpenURL Link

Protesters from across the mountains are demanding that Gov. Roy Cooper and other North Carolina officials put in place an eviction and foreclosure moratorium.

The demands came after Helene destroyed much of the region last month, tore apart infrastructure and left many without homes.

News outlets on the ground first reported a protest Oct. 16, where about 70 people met outside the Buncombe County courthouse in Asheville.

A news release said they want Cooper, state Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul Newby and local leaders to act.

"With the local economy in ruins, many face imminent eviction and foreclosure, putting them at risk of displacement when they can least afford it," the protesters' release said.

Asheville Food & Beverage United, the Western North Carolina Tenants Network, BeLoved Asheville and other local groups signed a letter calling for a moratorium.

Asked if the governor wants a moratorium on evictions, a spokesperson for Cooper didn't directly answer.

"As with our Executive Order requiring increased unemployment compensation payments, we continue to explore ways to work with state and federal partners as well as legislative and local leaders to help the people of western North Carolina recover," Jordan Monaghan said in an email. "We will constantly review the need for additional executive action as well as legislation by the General Assembly to support families in western North Carolina."

Newby's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday afternoon.

Ryan Oehrli covers criminal justice in the Charlotte region for The Charlotte Observer. His work is produced with financial support from the nonprofit The Just Trust. The Observer maintains full editorial control of its journalism.

Gov. Cooper increases NC unemployment benefits after Helene. Here's what's available.

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Ryan Oehrli, The Charlotte Observer, 'Protesters tell NC Gov. Roy Cooper, Chief Justice: Protect Western NC renters after Helene', *Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles* (online), 18 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C48A26E1DE93F8>



I-40 closure has truckers risking perilous roads in Great Smoky Mountains, NC park says

October 18, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (NC) Author: Mark Price, The Charlotte Observer | Section: north_carolina | 318 Words OpenURL Link

The narrow, winding roads in Great Smoky Mountains National Park are notoriously dangerous, but that's not stopping big rigs from using the park as a bypass for storm-damaged Interstate 40, park rangers say.

More than 800 commercial vehicles have been stopped trying to use the park's Newfound Gap Road in the three weeks since Tropical Storm Helene drenched the mountains with inches of rain, the National Park Service reported in a news release.

Some rigs have managed to slip into the park and ended up crashing, including an Oct. 5 incident in which a trucker pulling a car hauler crossed the center line and clipped a passing vehicle, officials say.

"In one (Oct. 3) incident, a commercial car hauler crashed into a wall and down an embankment and in the other, a semi-truck's brakes caught on fire. While responding to these incidents, eight semi-trucks drove past emergency responders," the park said.

i40embed

"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. US 441/Newfound Gap Road is not safe for large commercial vehicles."

Commercial vehicles caught using the park's roads can be fined up to \$5,000, officials say.

Checkpoints are now being staffed 24 hours a day at the Tennessee and North Carolina ends of Newfound Gap Road, in hopes of turning away trucks, officials said.

There is no date yet for the reopening of Interstate 40 — a major coast-to-coast artery — which saw multiple sections washed away by Helene. Much of the damage was in the Pigeon River Gorge area along the North Carolina-Tennessee state line.

Work begins to restore I-40 through the NC mountains, but timetable still uncertain

NC's Christmas tree industry — the second biggest in US — may be impacted by Helene

Helene flooding left dog stuck for days in top of tree, TN rescuers say. 'A miracle'

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North Carolina sees record turnout on first day of early voting

October 18, 2024 | Courier-Times, The (Roxboro, NC) Author: Elyse Apel | The Center Square | Section: State | 327 Words OpenURL Link

(The Center Square) – Following a record-setting first day of early voting in North Carolina, nearly half a million ballots have been cast.

As of Friday morning, 428,299 voters had turned out. That includes both absentee and early voting ballots.

Many were unsure how Hurricane Helene's devastation would affect voter participation, but the North Carolina State Board of Elections has taken several steps to assist the hardest-hit counties.

The record turnout was encouraging for state officials.

"Yesterday's turnout is a clear sign that voters are energized about this election, that they trust the elections process, and that a hurricane will not stop North Carolinians from exercising their right to vote," said Karen Brinson Bell, executive director of the North Carolina State Board of Election. "Let's keep it rolling, North Carolina."

Colin Loftin, a state board official, said more than 353,000 people alone cast ballots on Thursday, the first official day of voting, besting the record high of 348,000 set in 2020. Factoring in the 75,133 absentee ballots received, 5.5% of the state's 7.7 million registered voters have turned out so far.

The state board said there were long lines at the polling sites, but no significant issues were reported.

"Election officials expect more in-person voting this year than in 2020, when a record 18% of voters cast their ballots by mail due to the Covid-19 pandemic," the board said in a statement.

Georgia saw a very similar trend when they opened early voting earlier this week.

More than 300,000 Georgians cast their ballots on Tuesday, according to election officials. That is more than double the 136,000 cast on the first day of early voting in 2020. As of Friday, that number had already increased to just over 900.000.

North Carolina, with its 16 electoral votes, is one of seven consensus battleground states. Both presidential candidates and their campaigns have made frequent stops in the state, which also has several competitive downballot races.

In-person early voting will continue through Saturday, Nov. 2 at 419 sites across the state.

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North Carolina remains under \$3 a gallon for gas

October 18, 2024 | Courier-Times, The (Roxboro, NC) Author: Alan Wooten | The Center Square | Section: State | 256 Words OpenURL Link

(The Center Square) – North Carolina is one of 15 states under \$3 for a gallon of unleaded on Friday morning, according to AAA.

Only 12 states are lower than the \$2.98 average as analyzed by the American Automobile Association.

The \$3.48 average for diesel is 19th lowest in the country among all states.

Counties in the mountains impacted significantly by Hurricane Helene are varied, with the southern tip a little higher than the more northerly areas. Watauga County is at \$2.72 and Buncombe, where most of the state's fatalities happened, is at \$2.98.

Regular unleaded gasoline prices, says petroleum analyst Patrick DeHaan of GasBuddy, is like most other goods bought by Americans. General economic principles have the greatest impact on pricing, and automotive fuel also trickles in the blends used in summer and winter.

Of the three major metros, Raleigh and Wake County (\$3.02) along with Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (\$3.02) are higher than Greensboro and Guilford County (\$2.99).

North Carolina this year taxes gasoline at 40.4 cents per gallon, up 2 cents from last year and the fifth-highest in the country. States higher are California (57.9); Pennsylvania (57.6); Washington (49.4); and Illinois (45.4).

Among 14 major metro areas, unleaded gas is the least expensive in Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton at \$2.88. Most expensive is the Durham-Chapel Hill metro area (\$3.08).

Diesel is the most consumer-friendly (\$3.35) in New Bern.

In a state with the ninth-largest population of 10.8 million, roughly 8 million vehicle registrations are combustion engines, either gas or diesel. Total zero-emission vehicles registered is about 100,000, or 1 in 80 on the highways.

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Hurricane Helene: Protect Yourself After the Storm

October 18, 2024 | Daily Advance, The (Elizabeth City, NC) Author: Josh Stein Columnist | Section: News | 558 Words OpenURL Link

The impact of Hurricane Helene on western North Carolina is devastating.

As I've traveled the western part of the state to visit with and hear from the people who were affected, at the same time I've been heartbroken by the loss, I've been inspired by their optimism and the many ways they are showing up for each other.

As relief and recovery work continues, we want to ensure our neighbors out west have the resources and support they need. You can find this information by visiting www.ncdoj.gov/helene.

If you're in western North Carolina recovering from the damage, please watch out for price gouging, when a seller charges an unfair or excessive price. Also be wary of repair scams.

In the aftermath of a natural disaster, most contractors and tree removal professionals in North Carolina pitch in to help their community recover from a disaster. However, some scammers travel to areas that have been hit by storms and other disasters to rip off desperate homeowners.

Our office's Consumer Protection Division phone line is open for people to report price gouging or other Helene-related concerns. You can reach our office to make a report at 1-877-5-NO-SCAM or www.ncdoj.gov/pricegouging.

We are monitoring and reviewing price gouging complaints closely and have already sent out four civil investigative demands. We will not hesitate to take additional legal action if appropriate.

When the time comes to address repairs and needs for your own property, be safe and do not attempt to move downed power lines. It's also important to contact your insurance company before starting work.

Beware of contractors who try to rush you or come to your home offering assistance. Ask neighbors for recommendations. If possible, get three written estimates for the work and compare bids. Make sure your contract is in writing and it includes a payment schedule where you pay as the work is completed. Do not pay for work up front because you may not see the contractor again.

The outpouring of support for western North Carolina is tremendous, much needed, and much appreciated. If you're looking to donate to those impacted, make sure you're doing so safely and securely.

Choose the charities you know or research a charity's ratings and prior complaints with the Better Business Bureau, Charity Navigator, Guidestar, the North Carolina Secretary of State and NCDOJ's Consumer Protection Division.

Ask how the charity will spend your donation. You want as much as possible to go to people in need. Remember that if you're feeling pressured to give immediately, don't. Legitimate charities won't pressure you.

Be particularly careful with crowdfunding campaigns – only donate if you have verified that funds are going to a good cause.

When you're making your donation, pay with a credit card through the charity's website or by calling a phone number you know to be legitimate. Credit cards are best for security and tax purposes, and you can dispute the charge later if there's a concern.

One way you can provide support is through the North Carolina Disaster Relief Fund: www.nc.gov/donate.

North Carolinians' goodness shines in moments of crisis. I know it will be a long recovery, but I am so thankful to see neighbors helping neighbors, responders conducting search and rescue missions, and good samaritans everywhere helping. It's going to take weeks and months and, in some cases, years to rebuild. But we will, because in North Carolina, we're first in line to help each other.

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Editorial: Mark Robinson preaches but he doesn't practice

October 18, 2024 | Daily Advance, The (Elizabeth City, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Editorials | 621 Words OpenURL Link

While western North Carolinians worked to shovel themselves out of the destruction and devastation wrought by Hurricane Helene, Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson continued to dig himself into deeper holes of hypocrisy and neglect of his constitutional duties.

On Oct. 9, for just the second time this year, he actually appeared to do the job the North Carolina Constitution assigns him — preside as President of the North Carolina Senate. He attended a mere five Senate sessions in 2022 and only six sessions in 2023. He's missed 96% of the Senate meetings during the current session. Showing up to do the job taxpayers provide a \$157,400 annual salary (plus expenses) for shouldn't be a major news event.

During his unique appearance in the Senate chamber, he chastised politicians who sought to create division and cast aspersions amid the efforts to rescue and provide relief to those suffering from Helene's wrath.

His words came as the Republican-dominated legislature — in unanimous bipartisan votes — approved a relief package crafted largely by Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, the state Board of Elections and the Republican-led state Department of Public Instruction.

"I stood there as an elected official and thought about the foolishness of politics, arguments that people have, the accusations that people make against elected officials, the things that we see on TV, the commercials that we make, the campaigns we run and I, quite frankly, was embarrassed," he told the state Senate. "Each and every one of us should commit ourselves — and I'm sure you have — to double down on our efforts to not be politicians, to not make empty promises, but to be the servant leaders we're supposed to be."

Words are cheap. It takes integrity to stand up and honor the platitudes of a speech with actions that provide the true testimony.

On that count — as he has regularly done in his time in office and before — what Robinson demands of others isn't what he displays in his own behavior.

When it was time to make sure those in harm's way would have quick access to the resources necessary to help, Robinson was nowhere to be found. Twice he failed to vote, as a member of the Council of State, on a request for a declaration of emergency. He was the only one of the 10-member council (six Republicans and four Democrats) who failed to vote. Both requests (minus Robinson's failure to participate) were unanimously approved.

Less than a week after the storm hit the western part of the state — at an event in Louisburg (260 miles east of the center of the devastation) — it was Robinson who went after Democrats Gov. Roy Cooper and President Joe Biden.

He described Cooper's efforts as "abysmal" and, without a shred of evidence, said: "Joe Biden told the people of North Carolina they had no more supplies for us," adding, "Ask the people of western North Carolina if Joe Biden's response has made worth a hill of beans to them."

In an op-ed, Robinson also went after Cooper and the efforts of those in state government responding as "sluggish at best." A PolitiFact check found that the claims by Donald Trump and echoed by Robinson were false.

The truth is, as Robinson was speaking, thousands of federal and state relief and rescue personnel were on the scene or headed that way with supplies and to provide assistance.

A week later, it was that same Robinson who told the Senate, "We're not here to play games," adding he'd resign if he ever engaged in such behavior.

North Carolina voters don't have to wait on an unlikely resignation from Robinson — but by their votes in about three weeks can end his tenure in a job he doesn't show up to do anyway.

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Editorial: In rare Senate appearance, Lt. Gov. Robinson fails to distinguish himself

October 18, 2024 | Daily Advance, The (Elizabeth City, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Editorials | 620 Words OpenURL Link

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For just the second time this year he actually appeared to do the job the North Carolina Constitution assigns him — preside as President of the North Carolina Senate. He attended a mere five Senate sessions in 2022 and only six sessions in 2023. He's missed 96% of the Senate meetings during the current session. Showing up to do the job taxpayers provide a \$157,400 annual salary (plus expenses) for shouldn't be a major news event.

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Chris Lee aims to stay on the Forest City Board of Commissioners

October 18, 2024 | Daily Courier, The (Forest City, NC) Author: VICTORIA MCGUINN YOUNG vyoung@thedigitalcourier.com| Section: Archives | 684 Words OpenURL Link

Chris Lee is running for re-election to the Forest City Board of Commissioners to continue his vision of revitalization in the town, he said.

"I am running for re-election to continue the work that started many years ago — to revitalize the Town of Forest City, to grow our town and workforce opportunities, and to create a community that is welcoming and attractive to people and new business," he said in response to a Daily Courier candidate guestionnaire.

Chris said the town and council have worked together in order for town services and infrastructure to be up-to-date, efficient and effective.

He said, if re-elected, he will continue the work he has already pursued.

"My vision for our town is simple — keep growing and moving Forest City forward," he said. "We have many restaurants, specialty shops, downtown living, a collegiate-level baseball field, and water park with an amphitheater that have hosted many major concerts and various other events and festivals. All of this is helping to transform our town. We also maintain over 13.4 mile of the Thermal Belt Rails to Trails that connects Forest City with other cities in the county. We continue to work to bring in more businesses and housing for our town."

For Lee, some of the concerns residents face are the need for a strong infrastructure, more affordable housing, new businesses and taxes — but he said Hurricane Helene showed that infrastructure is a major concern. If re-elected, he said he would work with the town to identify and address the infrastructure needs.

"I feel our infrastructure needs are the greatest concern for our town. The recent hurricane showed us that our electrical grid and water systems need upgrades and equipment to ensure our citizens have power and water during an emergency," he said. "Our town staff did an amazing job restoring power faster than the rest of the county and our water and sewer department did a great job keeping our town with water. However infrastructure upgrades would have made their job easier during that disaster."

As for affordable housing and businesses, he said the town needs those two things to increase the tax base and to give people more options of places to live and work. He said the town council is already working toward this goal.

On the topic of taxes, he said that, while the tax rate increased, it allowed the town to purchase equipment that helped in the recovery of the storm.

"Due to changes in state laws, we unfortunately had to raise taxes several years ago to continue to provide a high level of service to our citizens," he said. "Because of the tax increase, we were able to purchase a much-needed grapple truck that and other equipment tremendously aided in the recovery of our power gird after hurricane Helene."

He said now and in future he considers the citizens and the services they need and expect in his duty as a responsible manager of the resources of the town.

Over the past 17 years, he said he's gained significant experience in municipal government, with a strong working knowledge of municipal budgets, the workings of town departments and infrastructure within the town. He said over the years he has obtained knowledge of the issues the town manager and employees face.

He said his strong relationship with town staff and employees would help him in another term.

Lee has been married to Monica Lee for almost 21 years, and they have two daughters and two sons-in-law. They also have a son in college and another son who is a senior in high school.

Lee has a degree in criminal justice from the University of Phoenix and works as a sheriff's deputy for the Rutherford County Sheriff's Office. He has served as a school resource officer at East Rutherford High School for the past seven years and at East Rutherford Middle School for three years. He is a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and a current member of the Brian Ebert Marine Corps League in Forest City.

He has served on the Forest City Board of Commissioners for 17 years and also served on various boards pertaining to the town.

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