

County coped well in storms

■ Leaders credit planning and cooperation
for success managing floods, power outages

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The county's response to last week's record rainfall and the resulting flooding was successful because there was an emergency plan in place, county leaders say.

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Plan kept series of storms manageable, officials say

STORM

It was a week that saw torrential downpours, roads washed out, the threat of Lake Needwood's dam breaking and the evacuation of more than 2,200 people.

In the middle of such an event, local government's first priority is to respond with whatever is necessary to ensure the safety of our residents," the county's chief administrative officer, Bruce F. Romer, said Friday afternoon.

Romer, who was in charge of the county's emergency response — County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) is on medical leave — praised local, state and federal agencies for their collaboration and successful implementation of the county's hazard mitigation plan.

Early last week, Montgomery officials estimated the county's costs for coping with as much as 12 inches of rain over four days, including overtime and damage to uninsured property, at about \$1.6 million, said Fire and Rescue Battalion Chief Brian S. Geraci. Expenses for bridge, road and dam repairs have not been tallied yet.

On Friday, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) asked for federal disaster relief for five counties, including Montgomery. On Sunday, President George W. Bush (R) declared parts of the state's Eastern Shore disaster areas. Although Montgomery County was not included in Bush's declaration, it could be added later to the list.

"We had a proper [plan] in place that was updated at the beginning of this year," Geraci said.

The plan, required by the federal government and maintained by the county's Department of Homeland Security, is confidential and contains information such as evacuation zones and rescue routes.

"There were not a whole lot of glaring issues," Geraci said. "Yes, we had a few glitches, but all in all, it went well and that's been a history with us in the county."

Relief efforts

When the storms began late on the afternoon of June 25, county Homeland Security Director Gordon A. Aoyagi pulled together a planning team to monitor the increasing rainfall. Two days later, as the weather intensified and the rains kept coming, an emergency management group — which included county agencies, utility companies, the Red Cross, county schools, volunteer groups and area officials — was activated.

It was this group, about 45 people working from the Emergency Operations Center in Gaithersburg, that coordinated evacuation efforts in the Lake Needwood area of Rockville, monitored shelters at local high



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schools and the county fairgrounds in Gaithersburg, maintained road closures, reported power outages and began cleanup efforts.

The group's highest-profile work involved the earthen dam surrounding Lake Needwood. The dam strained last week to contain the lake, but leaking worried engineers who were concerned that it might give way. More than 2,400 residents in Rockville and Kensington were ordered out of their homes as a precaution.

At one point, water in the lake rose to 23 feet above normal. More than 100 people from various agencies monitored the dam continuously, sleeping in shifts on the dam, said Mary Bradford, the county's parks director.

Late Thursday night, the water level and seepage began to subside and residents were allowed to return to their homes.

"I know we had to make some judgment calls that couldn't have been easy," said County Council President George I. Leventhal (D-At Large) of Takoma Park, whose own basement flooded twice during the week.

As engineers monitored Lake Needwood, Pepco officials worked to restore power in some of the county's hardest hit areas.

"These were small outages. We'd restore one and then get a call from somewhere else," said spokesman Robert Dobkin.

Dobkin said efforts were also slowed by crews helping with fire and police calls. The crews were called off restoration jobs to disconnect power at flooded homes. Dobkin estimated about 8,500 Montgomery homes last week were without power at any one time. By Friday, all outages had been restored.

But Sunday's thunderstorms cut power to more than 13,000 Pepco customers, including 6,000 largely in Rockville, Gaithersburg, Kensington and Garrett Park, who remained without electricity at noon Monday.

Trees and limbs fell on homes in the Wheaton and Glenmont areas on Sunday. Most of the damage was found in the 12800 block of Hathaway Drive and the 12200 block of Kendall Court, where a number of homes were affected, said Capt. Oscar Garcia, a fire and rescue services spokesman.

"Families were displaced, but most opted to go with family and friends," Garcia said.

Technology also played a key part in the county's response. Residents enrolled in the county's Alert Montgomery program received a series of weather, road and evacuation updates throughout the week by text messages on their cell phones and by e-mail. The service, provided through the county's Web site (www.montgomerycountymd.com), saw an influx in enrollments, up from about 5,000 before the storms to as many as 125 new enrollees a day, said Geraci, who manages the program. The cities of Rockville and Gaithersburg operate similar programs.

Moving forward

During a briefing last week by county officials on the county's response to the emergency, County Councilman Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large) of Silver Spring noted that unlike the Gulf Coast last year, storms here lacked the accompanying winds that are responsible for downed power lines, fallen trees and debris.

Another saving grace was that the county's public schools were closed for summer break when the storms hit. Some of the school system's practice fields were damaged, and a few classrooms at one school were affected, but there were no reports of extensive damage, said Richard G. Hawes, the school system's facilities manager.

Looking ahead, Aoyagi said the county still needs to invest in traffic signal generators to keep stoplights working during power outages.

In the future, all evacuation sites will have a county representative on site to provide residents with first-hand information, something that did not happen last week. Also, some cell phone companies, such as Cingular, have been contacted about failures in delivering Alert Montgomery messages.

"In emergencies, there is no perfect time and there are no perfect decisions," said Andrew D. Brunhart, general manager of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, which last week released water into the Patuxent River to relieve pressure on the Rocky Gorge reservoir. "That's why you put professionals in place to handle situations like these, and that is what happened this week in the county."

DAMAGE

Early estimates of damage caused by last week's storm totaled more than \$1.6 million, not including repair for roads, bridges and dams, according to the county's Department of Homeland Security.

Damage included:

- 18 county roads closed
- 5 malfunctioning traffic signals
- 8,500 Pepco power outages (not counting Sunday's outages)
- 147 flooded basement calls to county police
- 25 swift-water rescues completed by fire and rescue services
- 45 complaints about cable outages
- 2,200 people evacuated from homes, housed in emergency shelters

SOURCES: HOMELAND SECURITY, OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER AND COUNTY CABLE OFFICE

CLEAN-UP HELP

"Creating a Healthy Home: A Field Guide for Clean-Up of Flooded Homes" is available online at www.centerforhealthyhousing.org. A free DVD demonstrating procedures in the guide is available by calling 877-312-3046.

BEWARE OF SCAMS

Residents should be especially leery of offers from contractors who solicit door-to-door, particularly those who ask for payment up front or pressure homeowners to make an immediate decision, warns Attorney General J. Joseph Curran Jr.

To see if a contractor is licensed by the Maryland Home Improvement Commission, call 410-230-6309. Consumers also can ask about the contractor's complaint history.

Deal only with contractors who have an established business.

Be wary of phony relief efforts — solicitors who use the name of an organization similar to a well-known charitable organization. Check if a charity is registered with the state, as required, by calling the Secretary of State's Charities Division at 410-974-5534 or 800-825-4510. Make checks payable to the organization, not the individual asking for contributions.

For more, go to www.oag.state.md.us and click on Consumer Protection.

SOURCE: ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE

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