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Allenstown

Land of the rising Suncook

Riverside Drive residents deal with more flooding

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The rain had lessened, but the Suncook River continued to rise yesterday along and across Riverside Drive in Allenstown, prompting many to evacuate their flooded homes and leaving others with a sense of foreboding.

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How far would the river rise? Would it flood as it did in 2006 or 2007? And what would happen when the spring rains came?

People asked those questions as they walked along the road in waders, surveying their neighbors' submerged yards and the water pressing toward Route 28. A number of residents had already left their homes by afternoon, and those who hadn't left spent much of the day preparing to do so.

For Dave Leach, that meant loading his tools and equipment into a trailer behind his pickup, gathering up the essentials - "pair of boots, underwear, T-shirt, laptop" - and getting his Keeshond, Little Bear, out of the house.

"You can boat him out - I did one year - but that's not a good thing," said Leach, 48. He was standing on the southern portion of Riverside Drive, facing the road as it wound north and ran underwater. He pointed to his house, somewhere in the swampy distance. The water was up to the windows of a car, "an old junker" that Leach said belonged to his neighbor.

"We pulled his regular cars out this morning," Leach said.

Allenstown police Chief Shaun Mulholland said the police suggested residents on Riverside Drive leave the neighborhood yesterday, but by late afternoon they had not called for mandatory evacuations. Mulholland said boat crews were prepared to help people who hadn't yet left their homes.

"Some, the only way to get to them will be by boat," he said. A Fish and Game officer who went to check on one home had waded through water "up to his neck," Mulholland said.

And that was earlier in the day. The river had risen since then, Mulholland said, swollen by the 6 to 7 inches of rain he said the area had received since the weekend.

But that rain, while steady, wasn't unusually heavy, and not everyone along the Suncook expected the level of flooding that followed.

Though the area flooded heavily in 2006 and 2007, "generally, it doesn't flood here all the time," Leach said. He pointed to the basements



ALEXANDER COHN / Monitor staff
Mike Chadbourne (right) helps Tyler Graveline pump out the basement of his Riverside Drive home in Allenstown. Rain caused the Suncook River to flood again, and many residents voluntarily vacated their homes.

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that flooded after the recent windstorm as normal for the neighborhood. "But this," he said, "is nasty."

Four floods later

Leach moved to Riverside Drive five years ago, "three months before the first flood," he said. "You can't even get flood insurance that quickly."

Four floods later - three of which damaged his house - Leach said he has "no savings. No value in the house. I can't sell it."

A little farther down the road, Keith Donovan stood in his yard, echoing his neighbor's frustration.

"They buy half the houses out, and the rest, you're on your own," he said yesterday, referring to the federal grant that enabled the town to buy 15 homes along the riverfront.

"It's so stressful," he continued. "My insurance went up \$1,200 this year. Still going up."

Donovan, 44, moved to Riverside Drive six years ago. His house flooded in 2006 and 2007, and although it sits between the river and the road, Donovan knows from experience what will reach him first: the water that pools along Route 28.

That water had begun crossing the road not too far from Donovan's house yesterday. His neighbors across the street, their backyard resembling a lake, were working to hook up a sump pump, a task Donovan said they'd been at since 5:30 in the morning.

Donovan had hauled his belongings up from the basement. "My first floor looks like a bomb went off," he said. "We play this game year after year. . . . You can understand why people just want to get out of here."

Higher ground

At the southern end of Riverside Drive, Eugene Russell sidestepped belongings as he walked down the stairs into his basement. Like Donovan, he'd been moving his possessions to higher ground, lifting his washer and dryer onto tables three feet off the floor.

"If it gets to the 2006 level, we'll be okay," he said, standing in his basement, where water was beginning to puddle yesterday afternoon.

Russell wasn't sure yet if he'd have to leave his house and acknowledged that he had it better than many of his neighbors. Still, the repeated flooding has damaged his home, and the worry of more damage to come has weighed on him and his wife, who "started crying this morning," he said. "I'm hoping, but it's getting old, to be honest with you."

Russell walked back upstairs and sat on top of the granite countertop he put into his kitchen after moving into the home six years ago. After the floods in 2006 and 2007, Russell said he got checks from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, one totaling \$128 and the other \$156.

"I called up - I thought some zeros were missing," he said. "I said, 'Lady, I cannot buy a sash for my window with \$128.' I framed one of the checks."

He said FEMA advised him to pursue loans through the Small Business Administration.

"You go through a disaster," he said, "then you have to borrow twice to rebuild."

The problem with leaving, he said, is "none of us want to walk away with a huge minus."

Monitoring the situation

Police officers were stationed at the ends of Riverside Drive yesterday afternoon, and Mulholland said they would remain through the night, barring the neighborhood to everyone but residents. The fire department planned to keep a crew on standby, Mulholland said, and town officials will keep an eye on the river today.

"We've got a couple days before it goes down below flood stage," Mulholland said.

The Suncook River was also expected to be at flood stage in north Chichester last night, along with the Contoocook River in Henniker, according to Katya Brennan, spokeswoman for the state Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. Across the state, 100 local roads and 18 state roads were closed yesterday due to flooding, Brennan said.

Besides Allenstown, Brennan said, residents had evacuated from homes in Exeter and Somersworth.

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