

No one hurt, several rescued from flooding

by JEFF NEWMAN, Staff writer

Life is back to normal for most Charles County residents following a week of unprecedented rainfall that flooded many basements and closed dozens of roads, prompting the local government and school system to shut down for two days.

At one point more than 50 roads were either flooded or impassable, and even more had suffered some form of structural damage as storms spun over the region by Tropical Storm Lee dumped 8 to 10 inches of rain on much of the county, according to National Weather Service data.

Even more rain fell to the south of La Plata, especially around Newburg, where rainfall over the past week measured up to 20 inches.

Signs of damage are still prevalent, particularly underneath the Route 234 bridge crossing Allens Fresh — where flood erosion tripled the stream's width, closing the road — and along U.S. 301, where two sinkholes marred the southbound lane on either side of its intersection with Route 6.

Charles County Public Schools and county offices closed Thursday and Friday. The closings, in addition to another school day lost to Hurricane Irene, spurred the Charles County Board of Education to open school on Fair Day this Friday, which had been a scheduled day off for students.

Emergency responders reported no major injuries or deaths related to the flooding but did field a high number of calls from residents feeling its effects, county spokeswoman Crystal Hunt said. Among those calls were 14 for swift-water rescues, including one for mutual aid in Prince

George's County, she added.

The county declared a state of emergency Friday evening that will technically remain in effect for a full week. Officials plan to apply for homeowner and small business assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and are asking residents to help with damage assessments and report any uninsured flood damage they suffered during the rainstorms to the Department of Planning and Growth Management at 301-645-0692.

There was no damage estimate as of Tuesday afternoon, Hunt said.

"We're still in the recovery stage. We're still asking citizens to report the damage they've sustained," Hunt said. "I think the emergency part of it has passed us, but we're still in recovery mode and making sure everything is safe."

For more information on individual FEMA disaster recovery programs, go to www.fema.gov/assistance/process/individual_assistance.shtm.

Flooding was "pretty widespread throughout the county," but it might have hit hardest in the Cliffton on the Potomac neighborhood in Newburg, where a water main pipe washed away Sept. 14, Hunt said.

The county began issuing cases of bottled water to community residents and at one point even brought in a water tanker. Service was restored over the weekend, but the county has continued passing out bottled water and bags of ice, advising residents to boil any tap water they use for drinking or cooking.

Without water Thursday evening, Cliffton resident Angela Lindsey and her family took showers at her mother's home in La Plata.

But on the way back to their house on Riverview Drive, the family found a section of Cliffton

Drive completely submerged in floodwater. They turned around — only to be blocked by a tree that had just fallen across the road.

Trapped, the family parked in a neighbor's driveway and sat there for four hours, watching as two more trees fell in the same spot as the first. Members of the Newburg Volunteer Fire Department put down flares and left the scene but returned soon after to rescue a motorist who had tried but failed to drive on the flooded roadway, Lindsey said.

The family spotted at least three other cars in the same predicament and Lindsey even heard about a couple of people who had to be rescued after they parked their cars and tried to walk across the flooded area.

A section of Clifton Drive was eventually washed away entirely, leaving residents no way to cross other than in an area of rocks off to the side of the road sometimes used as a spot to pull over or turn around, Lindsey said.

“I've been here six and a half years and the road has never washed away like that,” she added.

County workers were on the scene soon thereafter attempting to patch the road, a response time that “absolutely” impressed Lindsey, she said.

“They came down right after and started working to fill it so that we weren't stuck in here,” she added.

Lindsey said her family lost water service Wednesday and had it back by Saturday. It lost power briefly Friday morning while a Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative crew worked to fix an electrical box that had been knocked askew.

The Department of Public Works called in contractors to help county workers in the Clifton neighborhood and other areas hit hardest by the storms, Hunt said.

All county roads that suffered flood damage have been temporarily repaired and will receive permanent fixes in the near future, she added.

The county also opened a temporary pet-friendly shelter at its Department of Community Services building in Port Tobacco for residents who were unable to get through the flooding to their homes.

U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) visited the county Sunday between Sept. 11 ceremonies to inspect flooding damage. Alongside commissioners' President Candice Quinn Kelly (D), Commissioner Ken Robinson (D) and county staffers, Hoyer surveyed three sites — the Cliffton community, U.S. 301 sinkholes and the Route 234 bridge — speaking to residents and repair workers along the way, according to a county news release.