

# Hamilton residents prepare for another bout with floods

By BEVERLY CRICHFIELD  
Staff Writer

HAMILTON — As the Skagit River began crawling over its banks Friday, the town of 350 braced for the usual flood risk that comes with heavy rains or melting snowpacks rushing down the North Cascades.

Tony Osborn headed across Cumberland Street from Willie's Tavern, just several blocks from where the muddy river began creep-

ing over the roadway, forcing dozens of recreational vehicles and campers to seek dry land.

"Hey, how you doin'?" called a friend in a large pickup truck as he cruised by Osborn.

"Good," Osborn replied. "Hey, the dike broke."

Osborn's friend stepped on the brake pedal of his truck, bringing the vehicle to an abrupt stop.

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Longtime Hamilton resident Bud Cook maneuvers a trailer to the hitch on the back of his pickup truck so that he can drag his riding lawn mower to higher ground Friday. High water on the Skagit River threatened to flood the town again, after heavy rains pounded the area.

Scott Terrell  
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"What? Where?"

"Just kiddin'," Osborn yelled back with a laugh as he continued across the street to the grocery store.

The town of Hamilton sits on the banks of the Skagit River about 12 miles from Sedro-Woolley just off the North Cascades Highway.

Dealing with floods is such a way of life in Hamilton that people often joke about it. But flooding also has brought the town's inhabitants closer. They often help each other pack furniture, keepsakes and electronics into moving trucks when they evacuate the rain-soaked town.

That's exactly what some folks close to the river were doing Friday.

James Thomason, co-owner of Willie's Tavern on the corner of Cumberland and Maple streets, hastily hefted several large speakers out of the building and into a U-Haul truck. He's lived in Hamilton for years and has seen the damage done by the 1995 flood that left the town under water.

Through the years, the tavern has been equipped to survive high water. Electrical outlets are above the 1995 flood level, now marked out on a beam next to the bar in a black line. Even the slot for the big-screen color television on the wall was cut just above that line, to keep the television dry — just in case.

Thomason and a group of friends living nearby lifted the



Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

A fire truck and several other vehicles make their way slowly through muddy flood waters that crept over a roadway in Hamilton Friday. Many residents were moving their belongings to higher ground while storm watchers closely monitored the elevation of the Skagit River.

pool table on to several high tables and moved several vending machines on to the bar.

"We painted the walls yesterday, and look!" Thomason said with a bitter grin. "It's gonna flood. Great."

But he and other folks in town have the evacuation process down to a science — turn off the electricity, elevate items high off the ground and get away from the river, he said.

"It's a matter of everybody helping everybody else," he said.

Theresa Boots, a friend of Thomason, tried to help drag items out of the bar, while the water continued to move closer just blocks away. Meantime, she was wondering how much time it would take to secure her own home across the street.

Boots moved to Hamilton this year. Although she's heard the horror stories from locals, she was only getting a taste of the kind of disaster they'd lived through.

"I just moved here and I'm

not sure what's going to happen," she said. "I didn't know it would be like this. Everyone just panics."

Not knowing what to expect is the worst, said Bud Cook, a Hamilton resident who spent the afternoon loading several lawn mowers he uses to make a little extra money into some trailers to take to a friend's house on the hill north of his home.

"I can't afford to move," he said, while driving his Yard Man riding lawn mower onto a trailer and tying it down. "You always have a little consternation about something like this because people aren't sure whether to leave or not."

Others didn't take any chances.

John Matheson climbed into his small mobile home he had hauled north of the river across the North Cascade Highway up a hill to the parking lot of the First Baptist Church.

His trailer sat next to several long lines of trailers that rou-

tinely park along the edge of the river year 'round. Several years ago, the church offered to open its doors to help those people needing a temporary place to stay while the floodwaters subsided. Those trailers did not have access to a sewer, water or electricity, except for inside the church.

The Red Cross set up a disaster station at the church and provided about 60 meals for the trailer-dwellers.

Matheson said he's pleased to have somewhere to go when it floods. He used to wait out the floods and wade through the brown waters until they receded.

But a stroke has caused him to have to haul his small mobile home away from the riverbanks.

"I guess I get to camp out for a while," he said, laughing. "The floods are just a normal way of life."

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