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Flood hardens residents' resolve County needs fed. aid

Flood damage extensive

By Laura Pierce

Officials say federal assistance will be crucial in helping Skagit County — especially its upriver region — recover from last week's record-breaking flood of the Skagit River.

"We absolutely need federal aid — there is no way else to help these people," said Skagit County Commissioner Ted Anderson, speaking Monday.

Anderson, whose district includes the hardest-hit communities of Hamilton and Cape Horn, noted dollars are short for many residents here, when it comes to reclaiming their homes and property from the quagmire of mud and river water that has swamped them.

"The needs are great," he said. "A lot of people in Hamilton also are on the lower end of the financial spectrum. They don't have the resources."

"And Cape Horn on North Shore Drive — it's just devastated."

For that reason, Anderson and other officials in Skagit County are optimistic of their chances of having Skagit County declared a disaster area by the state and then by the federal government.

Those steps are what it will take for the federal Emergency Management Agency to free up funds in response to the damage wreaked by flooding.

Anderson said work was progressing quickly on getting damage assessments to the office of state Gov. Gary Locke.

"We had the damage-assessment teams going out full and strong," Anderson said, noting the county was attempting to get the personal-property damage estimates to Locke that day, and would follow up with damage estimates to infrastructure in the county by Thursday.

Officials at Locke's office said the paperwork thus far was in the process of being reviewed.

Anderson said it had been helpful to have Locke in person Thursday, touring some of the county's hardest-hit areas.



Photos by Laura Pierce

Above: Hamilton resident April Osborne plays with her dogs and a rowboat in her front yard last Wednesday, following a major flood of the Skagit River that swamped her town and flooded her home. Below: Jim Thomason, manager of Willie's Hi-Lead Tavern in Hamilton, cleans flood silt out of the business, while a television photographer follows him.

Many plan to stay where they are

By Laura Pierce

HAMILTON — Jim Thomason said he's seen worse.

Pushing a broom through the gloppy brew of mud and river water that mired itself to the floor of Willie's Hi-Lead Tavern last Wednesday, Thomason, manager of the establishment, said it was a matter of time before the tavern opened for business again.

"We'll put driers in here; we'll hose it out — it's repairable," Thomason said.

The Hamilton resident, whose home also was flooded out when the rains turned the Skagit River into a monster last week, said he had no intention of leaving the community he calls home.

"This is an awesome community," he said. "I was raised here; my home's here — this is where I live."

Pausing his conversation to give another heavy push on



the saturated broom, Thomason, who spent some of his adult years in other parts of the county — including the south, where he dealt with Hurricane Hugo — added, "it's yucky, but I've seen worse."

That kind of thinking seemed pervasive in the Town

of Hamilton, a low point on the Skagit River that sustained the worst damage last week when the rain-swollen Skagit River left its banks and flooded all but five homes in the town.

Countywide, a total of 95 homes saw major damage, 13 were destroyed and another 78

residences had minor damage.

A fair number of those affected homes were located in Hamilton, as well as the Cape Horn community further upriver near Concrete.

"I've been through three floods," said another Hamilton man spotted wading

OVER

Flood

Continued from page 1

through his flooded front yard last Wednesday morning, as his daughter paddled around the street in a boat and the family dogs chased her playfully.

"I love it up here," the man added, noting he was planning to buy the home in which they were renting.

"We're hoping to buy it still," he said. "We're gonna remodel."

He noted they weren't homeless by any stretch of the imagination, with the floodwaters in their home. His family, he said, was camped out in its trailer with all the amenities.

"We've got everything: lights, food, generators," he said. "It's just a home away from home."

"It's just that the first home's gonna take some work."

Ron Edwards, pastor at the Hamilton First Baptist Church, said he's seeing that same kind of resolve as well. He's had ample opportunity: for the past week his church has served as a major pulse point for the Hamilton community, functioning as a Red Cross shelter and temporary parking area for a multitude of residents camping out in their trailers.

"A lot of people say they have no intention of moving out," Edwards noted Tuesday. "It does amaze me, quite honestly. They just love living here. They love the community and anything about it."

But, the pastor noted, there are tremendous needs in the Hamilton community and other flood-hit areas as well. His church has been accepting all manner of donations for area residents, from money and clothing to furniture and appliances.

While there seems to be enough in the way of clothing donations, Edwards said items like bedding, mattresses, furniture and appliances continue to be needed by residents.

The church has three 20-foot storage containers and

two of them are full, Edwards said, with the third half-full.

"We've still got plenty of room for small household items like toasters and lamps," he said, of the room that's left.

The church is located at 797 Hamilton-Cemetery Rd., Hamilton, Wash. 98255. Edwards said if people are sending monetary donations, checks made to the church should have written on the bottom of them: "flood victims only."

Call the church ahead of time at 826-3307 if you have a large furniture item or appliance you're planning to donate.

Skagit County Commissioner Ted Anderson, who spent most of his waking hours last week evaluating flood damage in person, said Monday the needs of people in those affected areas were great.

"It's a lot of tragedy," he said. "People need to be aware in our county that there's a lot of hurting going on."

"The needs are great. In my estimation, we're probably going to have over \$3 million in damage upriver, that's what I think."

Dumpsters hauled upriver for affected residents to dump their debris into easily have been filled. Anderson said a total of 28 30-yard dumpsters were filled over the weekend alone.

"It's going to be a monumental amount of tonnage," he said.

Anderson said assistance in the form of federal dollars would be crucial to the damage sustained in this year's disaster.

"We absolutely need federal aid — there is no way else to help these people," he said.

In other areas of Eastern Skagit County, floodwaters didn't make such a monumental impact.

In Sedro-Woolley, floodwaters did some damage to Riverfront Park — including actually floating a section of blacktop off a road — but



Photo by Gordon Bakke

Inundated by floodwaters, the Town of Hamilton is shown in this aerial photo dated Oct. 21. All but five homes were flooded in the community. The deposited mud and debris of the floods will require intense cleanup.

overall, damage was minimal. The City Council, in keeping with other entities across the county, declared a state of emergency at its regular meeting last Wednesday.

"We were very lucky," Mayor Sharon Dillon said Monday. "I'm very proud of my staff. They pulled together when pulling was needed."

The flood waters, though high, she said, weren't enough to cause problems at the city sewer plant, which remained in operation through the event.

In Concrete, approximately 11 homes saw damage from the floodwaters, in addition to other facilities.

The record crest of 42.2 feet damaged more property than the 1990 or 1995 floods, according to Mayor Robin Feetham.

"Clean-up operations are

under way down there now," Feetham said Thursday. "We've brought in a dumpster for people to use."

It's a waiting game to see if federal dollars will be forthcoming to help residents with the clean-up and repair of their properties.

"As we understand it, there will be FEMA officials coming through and making estimates," Feetham said of the Federal Emergency Management Agency operations. "I don't know in what form relief is going to come."

While residents start the clean-up of the mud, the mayor said he hopes they don't soon forget lessons learned.

"The fact that the flood was so heavy up here and didn't do as much damage as was expected below has given us a lot of information to pos-

sibly mitigate the damage done in the future," Feetham said. "I certainly hope we can put this information to good use."

Hamilton Mayor Tim Bates, reached at home Monday, seemed to capture the overall feeling of the region,

when asked about the damage to people's homes and how they were doing.

"Overall," he said, "we're going to do all right."

Reporter Ruth Richardson contributed to this article.