

Suffolk

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'Everything else can be replaced'



Residents grateful after likely tornado damaged homes but took no lives

BY TRACY AGNEW
EDITOR

Suffolk residents started picking up the pieces on Tuesday morning after Hurricane Isaias left destruction in its wake, likely spawning at least one or two tornadoes near

downtown.

Meredith Stielow and her fiancé, Bryce Monteyro, bought their Riverview house on Western Avenue in January and have already canceled their wedding once due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They are supposed to get married next

Saturday.

"We had fallen asleep on the couch," Stielow said. "He heard the tornado warning, so he got up and looked out the window and it was really quiet — and then he heard a

See **TORNADO**, 3

TRACY AGNEW/SUFFOLK NEWS-HERALD

Mary Davies points out where the tree came from that caused heavy damage to her Riverview home during a likely tornado spawned early Tuesday by Tropical Storm Isaias.

Widespread damage, power outages

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

3:06 a.m.

Michelle Pierce said that time will be stuck in her head for a long time, after strong winds from an apparent tornado in the early morning hours of Tuesday morning knocked down a large tree in front of the house next door to hers on Cedar Street downtown.

Pierce, who has lived in her three-story at 202 Cedar St. for more than 15 years, said at one

point during the storm, she had gone outside during a lull in Tropical Storm Isaias, and a neighbor had admonished her to go back into her house.

She saw trees along her street bending over toward the homes on her side of the street, and then when inside as the tornado was overhead, the doors inside her home were opening and closing, and the home itself was shaking.

"I keep getting goosebumps because I'm still shook," Pierce said as she stood outside her home late Tuesday morning, her

11-year-old son and 16-year-old daughter finally asleep after being awake during the overnight hours. "It got quiet and we just hear this noise, whoooooosh."

She and her son jumped up and were yelling out that there was a tornado, and all of her windows were rattling.

"You could feel it," Pierce said, as she began to stomp to demonstrate. "What in the world? The whole house, you could feel it."

Her thoughts at the time? "What are we going to do? We've got nowhere to go," Pierce

said. "It's crazy. We were just so scared, and then it just stopped."

The city reported two possible tornadoes touched down during the early morning hours Tuesday in the downtown and King's Fork areas of Suffolk as part of Tropical Storm Isaias, with strong winds knocking down trees and power lines, while damaging numerous homes and businesses.

The city reported damage in the area from White Marsh Road to the King's Fork area, with the Riverview and Hall Place

neighborhoods taking the brunt of one, while areas of downtown on Cedar Street near Peanut Park, as well as areas of downtown along South Saratoga and West Washington streets, also sustained heavy damage from downed trees and strong winds.

As of mid-morning Tuesday, Dominion Energy reported 21,000 outages in Suffolk, which is about 83% of its customers in the city.

By about 3 p.m. Tuesday, there

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Damage: Shelter closed after nobody showed up

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were 15,570 Dominion customers in the city without power, with more than 180,000 people without power among its customers in southeastern Virginia as of mid-afternoon Tuesday. With more than 500,000 Dominion customers in Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina who had lost power through midday Tuesday, it said it would be at least several days before power was fully restored, especially in North Carolina, Hampton Roads, the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. Community Electric Cooperative had reported about 2,200 people without power, or about 67% of its city customers, as of mid-morning Tuesday.

The city was also reporting multiple roads with downed trees and power lines, including Turlington Road, Bennetts Pasture

Road, U.S. Route 58 eastbound at Wilroy Road, a part of Route 58 westbound, the 4700 block of Whaleyville Boulevard and the 5500 block of Godwin Boulevard. City Public Works crews are working in those affected areas, and city officials ask that residents stay off of affected roadways and out of damaged neighborhoods, as damage assessments are ongoing.

Heavy damage could be seen to buildings along South Saratoga and West Washington streets, including the Brandon House, which sustained significant damage to its windows and roof. The rear of the building at 101 S. Saratoga St. was blown out, and there was also damage to the front, rear and roof of the nearby Suffolk News-Herald building. Windows to cars parked beside the building

were damaged, mostly on their right side.

The city asked residents to use "extreme caution" when performing damage assessments in the aftermath of the storm. With the sun coming out, many residents ventured downtown to get a closeup view of the damage.

Donald and Nicole Perkins, who live next to the News-Herald building at 132 W. Washington St., said they heard the apparent tornado come through around 3:13 a.m. They said they had three canopies that were destroyed, but their residence did not sustain damage.

"I heard the alerts go off on our phone and I got a call from another tenant here, a friend of ours, stating the same thing, and at that time, things (were) blowing around," said Donald Perkins. "I looked outside and it was just a

downpour."

He said they received two different alerts on their phones for a tornado warning, waking them up, and then they heard what sounded like a tornado come through.

"It was very loud, yeah," Donald Perkins said. "Even just this morning coming out after it had all passed, just opening the door my dog went crazy just hearing the wind outside."

The city said damage assessment teams would be out throughout the day Tuesday, focusing on private property damage. Residents are asked to call the Emergency Operations Center at 514-4570 to report any damage to private property. It was taking calls through 5 p.m. Tuesday, and advised that people could also call Wednesday, beginning at 8:30 a.m.

Several city streets will also remain closed indefinitely, including West Washington Street at Main Street to Pine Street, as well as South Saratoga Street at West Washington Street to Smith Street. Detour signs are being placed in those areas. While sidewalks in several areas are also closed, businesses that were not directly affected remain open.

Cedar Hill Cemetery closed Tuesday and was to remain closed Wednesday so several large, downed trees could be removed.

The city had opened an emergency shelter at King's Fork High School early morning Tuesday, but by 1 p.m., it had closed, as no residents came to the shelter or needed assistance there, city officials reported. The Emergency Operations Center at Suffolk Fire and

Rescue Station 6 was to transition to virtual operations at 5 p.m. Tuesday.

The National Weather Service's Wakefield office will be out at several areas of Western Tidewater and northeastern North Carolina to investigate possible tornadoes, according to meteorologist Mike Montefusco. He said there was also significant damage in the Gates and Bertie county areas of northeastern North Carolina, as well as parts of Western Tidewater and into Gloucester and Mathews counties on the Middle Peninsula reporting scattered wind damage.

"At this point we have not conducted those surveys just yet, so those tornado surveys will actually be ongoing, hopefully this evening through the next couple of days," Montefusco said.

Tornado: National Weather Service will assess damage

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loud whistling noise."

Stielow said he woke her up and rushed her to the hall bathroom, where they began screaming for their roommate. He started coming down the stairs just when the tree fell into his bedroom.

Stielow called her mom and stepdad, who live just down the street, and they came to pick them up while the storm still raged. Stielow and Monteyro took their two dogs, two cats and their birth certificates with them.

"Everything else can be replaced," she said. Later in the day, family members were helping rescue bridesmaids dresses for their upcoming wedding as well as other necessities

and mementos.

Just around the corner, Mary Davies and her husband, Tom, suffered heavy damage to their home, and he got a gash to the face.

"The alerts woke us up, and I was Facetiming with my son when we heard it," she said. "The tree came in the back, opened up the back, and that's where the wind was coming from, so it threw him across the room," she said.

A sizeable contingent of family and friends showed up to the Davieses' home to help them salvage clothes and move furniture to a part of the house where it wouldn't get wet, while Tom Davies was at the hospital getting stitches.

Mary Davies said she

was grateful she and her husband were OK.

"That's the most important thing," she said.

Residents on Culloden Street were among the first to bear the brunt of the likely tornado.

"It sounded like a train," said Gene A. Jones. "I came to the door and looked, laid back down and that was when I heard the cracking noise."

The storm passed through the Hall Place neighborhood south of downtown, where numerous trees were uprooted. Neighbors Zoe Meece and Arenia Rice described what it sounded like as they surveyed the damage.

"It was a giant lightning," Meece said, pointing to her

other neighbor's tree on the ground. "It hit his tree. I could hear it come down at the same time as this giant roar, like a freight train. Then I just started hearing ... transformers blowing."

"I heard the same thing," Rice said. "A woosh, and then I saw a flash of something, that was about it. It was really fast. After a while, when it got quiet, we all came outside."

The storm apparently moved on to the downtown business district after it was done with Hall Place. The Suffolk News-Herald building sustained heavy damage, as did Knight Finance and Brandon House furniture nearby. The storm also damaged Suffolk Fire & Rescue

Station 1 before it arrived in Riverview.

More Riverview residents like Stielow and Davies described taking shelter during the storm.

Taylor Johnson said he, his wife, their 2-year-old daughter and the dogs went to the basement when they got the alarm. He remembers it being around 3:20 a.m.

"I went back upstairs to grab the dogs, and when I did I looked out the window and saw the blue lights from the power lines arcing," he said. "And then I heard this really loud, low rumble and I'm like, 'OK, yeah, we definitely need to get down to the basement and get secure.'"

Stephen Rhodes had lots

of trees down around his home but little damage to the house itself. He said he and his wife went downstairs when they got the tornado warning alert. He was sitting on the back porch, and his wife was inside with the two dogs.

"Suddenly, I don't know how to describe it, you could just tell something was coming," he said. "I hopped inside, slammed the door, the power went out and it was over in what felt like three seconds, just that quick."

Rhodes was working on freeing his vehicle from the bundle of downed trees and branches.

"We're fortunate," he said. "We've just got a mess."