

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/rush-hour-in-afton-causes-frustration-concerns-for-residents/article_bd3575b4-d912-11eb-8af6-ef0a6f80075a.html

Afton | Virginia 6

Rush hour in Afton causes frustration, concerns for residents

Nick Cropper

Jun 30, 2021



A message board on Rockfish Valley Highway warns tractor trailer drivers to not use Virginia 6.

Nick Cropper, The News & Advance

From a “lazy road” to a “disaster waiting to happen.”

Since a rockslide hit Afton in early May, closing a portion of U.S. 250 connecting the Shenandoah Valley with Central Virginia, motorists were left to use the Virginia 6 route as one of only a couple other alternatives.

But residents who live along the normally peaceful Afton Mountain Road have watched it become burdened with heavy traffic, noise and stuck tractor-trailers attempting to use the roadway as a viable alternative, resulting in safety concerns and mounting irritation for some.

Victoria Dunham lives along Virginia 6 between two reverse curves and has seen a number of tractor trailers become stuck despite warnings from several signs stating thru-tractor trailers are not permitted on the road.

“It’s unbelievable noisy. It used to be a lazy road,” Dunham said. “We have a lot of sympathy and we’ve always been open to the idea of sharing the road with commuters but the badly behaving traffic has become a huge issue.”

Dunham, who the other day was picking up chunks of reflector left in her yard after her mailbox was hit for a second time, said she’s also seen and heard of people driving recklessly along the narrow, twisting mountainous road since it became the detour for everyday motorists.

“Personal inconvenience and the tremendous amount of noise and the disruption to people’s lives aside, most people — me included — are just holding our breath dreading the likelihood of someone being seriously injured or killed. That’s our greatest fear,” Dunham said.

The issues now gripping Afton Mountain Road began in May when an 80-foot tall by 240-foot-wide rockslide dumped tons of rocks, soil and debris onto the roadway below, closing U.S. 250 — Rockfish Gap Turnpike — between the top of Afton Mountain and Critzer Shop Road.

Lou Hatter, communications manager with VDOT's Culpeper division, said he was "cautiously optimistic" VDOT could complete work on the rockslide and have U.S. 250 reopened ahead of their anticipated mid- to late-July timeframe.

"It truly has been a team effort and everybody is pulling as hard as we can to get it open as quickly as possible," Hatter said. "Everybody's got their fingers crossed."

Hatter said work to stabilize the slope via rods that are drilled into the soil is nearly complete, but the exact reopening date will be affected by weather, additional time to clean up debris and if the road needs to be repaved.

Dunham said although the issue is ongoing for her and her neighbors, she said VDOT had done its due diligence in intervening to mitigate the problem. She also thanked the efforts of law enforcement.

"People have been very patient and we're fully understanding that people need to use this road ... but things have just devolved to the point where its just not tenable," Dunham said.

Hatter said in a phone call June 24 the prohibition on through tractor-trailers using Virginia 6 was in effect long before the early May rockslide because of the dangers those types of vehicles posed on the mountainous road.

Trucks still are allowed, however, if they are making a delivery.

He said VDOT is well aware of the issue and have deployed "significant resources to try to address that." There are a number of verbal and nonverbal signs communicating tractor trailers are prohibited on the roadway both at and around the entrances to Virginia 6 as well as radio messages to incoming truckers.

VDOT also has been working with local and state law enforcement to curtail and ticket tractor trailers using that road.

“We’re throwing every resource we can think of at this. We understand its a problem, we do appreciate that the residents are dealing with something that’s not only an inconvenience but its also a safety concern,” Hatter said. “There’s limited options for getting traffic across there but that doesn’t mean it’s OK for people to violate the law and use that as a cut-through.”

According to a Friday news release from VDOT, Virginia State Police will continue to provide coverage during the closure and immediately after Rockfish Gap Turnpike reopens.

Since its closure May 3, troopers have issued a total of 109 summonses related to the road closure, with 23 of those for commercial vehicle violations on U.S. 250 and 29 as well as Virginia 151 and 6, the release states.

Nelson County Sheriff David Hill said in an email to The News & Advance that VDOT, county officials, VSP and the sheriff’s office had teamed up to address safety concerns. He noted the sheriff’s office and VSP got the greenlight to implement directed law enforcement coverage 24/7 as of Friday to address the concerns.

“This approach would not be possible without the support of our citizens, local board members, county administration, delegates, and our state and local government,” Hill said.

Knowing it still could be a matter of weeks before Virginia 250 reopens, alleviating the burden on Afton Mountain Road, resident Feather Stein said that prospect made her feel, “not good. Not good at all.”

Stein likened leaving her home to a game of Russian Roulette, not knowing whether or not she might encounter a tractor trailer and said she has safety concerns for herself and other motorists.

“It’s been quite scary and dangerous. Just from the get-go, my neighbors and I have been totally stressed. It was amazing to find out they were feeling the stress like I was. It gets to the point where you’re listening, you’re always listening for the trucks,”

Stein said.

Stein also recounted how she's seen tractor trailers honking their horns as they navigate the hairpin turns, often requiring both lanes, attempting to let other motorists know of their approach.

Understanding the burden placed on residents, Hatter said VDOT is working as quickly as possible to stabilize the slope and reopen Virginia 250.

“Know that we are working as quickly as we can, as safely as we can to get the slope stabilized and project completed,” Hatter said.

https://newsadvance.com/community/nelson_county_times/news/this-is-just-the-start-lovingston-fire-chief-reflects-on-long-ongoing-road-to-recovery/article_99463d41-3c69-51a9-8ef1-8971d0b7bac0.html

'This is just the start': Lovingston fire chief reflects on long, ongoing road to recovery

Nick Cropper

Feb 24, 2021



Lovingston Fire Chief Danny Johnson.(Photo by Lee Luther Jr.)

Lee Luther Jr.

Faith, family and friends.

It was those three pillars that helped carry Lovingston Volunteer Fire Department Chief Danny Johnson through numerous surgeries, repeated stays in the hospital and months of physical therapy.

“The blessings that my family, friends and people that I’ve never met they prayed for me, donated — that’s what got me here,” Johnson said.

When Johnson suffered severe injuries following a late-May motorcycle accident that nearly cost him his left leg and heavily restricted his mobility, it wasn’t a matter of if he would walk again, but when.

A modified walker capable of supporting his left arm which had been fused at a 90 degree angle sat beside the fire chief as he recalled the past roughly nine months and the journey that led to him again being able to sit at his desk at his Lovington business the Blue Dog.

Across from his desk sits a donated scooter to help him traverse his workplace.

He had compound fractures in the upper and lower portions of his leg and his elbow had been “ripped open and basically beyond repair.” Johnson’s left foot, which also suffered severe damage, had only minimal repairs.

Johnson, a Nelson County native, was out of commission for several months because of the accident and several individuals had to step up to fill the void left behind in his absence.

Gradually Johnson has since resumed his duties at the Blue Dog and administrative responsibilities at the firehouse, although he said he’s eager to get to back to responding to calls like he did before the accident. He’s also been reelected president of the Nelson County Emergency Services Council.

Johnson has returned to working at the Blue Dog, a wholesale distributor for Meals on Wheels programs and senior feeding programs based in Lovington, five days per week on limited hours on top of resuming duties at the firehouse and EMS council.

He also is constantly working on rebuilding strength in his leg and goes to physical therapy once per week.

Not long after the fire department established a benefit fund to help pay for medical bills or other health-related costs, donations started flooding in. That fund, as well as fundraising events, has brought in a total of just more than \$30,000, according to Johnson's brother, David, who is the fund's treasurer.

"We're grateful for how people in the community stepped up and how things were taken care of for him," David Johnson said.

David Johnson added he felt the fundraisers were successful considering the larger context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A tumultuous few months

On May 30, Johnson was traveling with his son and two friends when the left side of his motorcycle brushed the side of another vehicle. As his bike went down, Johnson held on, continuing to grip his motorcycle until it came to a stop.

"It was a motorcycle accident going down the side of a car. There's no good way to put it," Johnson said.

He never lost consciousness, at least not at first, and even knew some first responders on scene. Johnson was transported via helicopter to the University of Virginia Medical Center and eventually blacked out once he arrived.

From there he bounced in and out of surgeries, often having two or three operations per week until about mid-July. Much of the June-July timeframe is a fog, Johnson said, as he described never quite coming out of a surgery before going under once again.

"A lot of June is just not available to me," Johnson said. "It was a blessing in a way I didn't remember all of that that was going on. I was living it but I just didn't remember it."

Although he wasn't aware of it at the time, doctors' major concern was saving Johnson's left leg, he said. He also was immobilized for roughly a month and a half during the most surgery-intensive portion of his recovery. Muscle atrophy had wiped away most of the strength in the parts of his body that hadn't been severely damaged from the accident.

Another surgery in September on the upper and lower portions of his leg and subsequent recovery period did stall that progress, however.

When he first started walking again in August, progress for the first few days was measured in feet, starting with a few steps in the room before moving into the hallway.

"I stood for the first time just a couple weeks after that using parallel bars in a therapy room, but I was able to stand," Johnson said. "I knew then when I stood I said, 'This is just the start.'"

By the time he came out of his bedridden state, the threat of losing his leg had essentially disappeared. He was first released from the hospital July 15 and went to rehab in Charlottesville until early October having constant appointments in the meantime. In September, he went back to the hospital for another surgery and has been doing physical therapy since he was released about five days later.

Johnson said even by his doctors' standards, he has made quick progress, working each day to rebuild the strength he lost.

Sometimes, however, that progress has been slowed by his own ambition and pushing himself too hard.

"Patience is a big thing in this and I never had a lot of patience. God's timing is not Danny's timing. I would have been there already but His time is perfect, mine is not," Johnson said.

Through the mental and physical hardships of his recovery, Johnson was free from the burden of having to worry about financial concerns or paying for his treatment as a result of the community's generosity.

David Johnson, who took over his brother's responsibilities at the Blue Dog with the help of their sister, Susan Johnson Baldwin, for several months, said having taken care of the financials took a large portion of the pressure off of his brother's shoulders.

Danny Johnson said he couldn't fathom the words that would adequately thank a community that carried him in his time of need.

"How do you repay somebody that took a worry away from you? That prayed for you?" Johnson said. "It just is beyond any means that I have of explaining or showing appreciation because you're selling it short."

With service at his core, Johnson said he never anticipated to "get it back one day." But the most amazing part, Johnson said, was that his own need could be taken care of without him even knowing what was going on.

"I knew things were going on and people were praying and people wanted to help but I didn't realize the totality of that until after I really got home [for the first time]."

The road ahead

Despite the fire chief's rapid progress, which he said has even surpassed doctors' expectations, he still has a long way to go.

"They keep referring to everything being one year since your last surgery ... I'm focused on trying to be one year from the accident," Johnson said.

Walking on a cane is the next step in Johnson's journey, a feat he's already achieved once on Christmas Day and one he's hoping to accomplish again during the springtime. Ultimately, Johnson is hoping to get back to the point where he can run calls again with his crew even though it may not look the same as before the accident.

Johnson said he is mostly being held back by the pain he feels in his left foot

He underwent foot surgery last week to finally address those issues.

“I think it’s within reach. I think the expectation with this surgery is to move that more into a reality. His balance is there and muscle strength and memory is coming around,” David Johnson said of his brother moving to a cane.

Regardless, Johnson said every step he takes, whether that be in physical therapy or just getting out of bed in the morning, brings him closer to being back on his feet full time.

“Everything you do is building strength and you have to look at it that way. If you look a day or two at a time or even a week at a time you don’t see your progress but if you look where you were a month ago versus today it makes you smile.”

‘To serve again’

While Johnson’s motorcycle days might be behind him, his days of serving the community are not.

“My goal is to serve again,” Johnson said. “I served this community because I wanted to since 1989 when I joined the fire department. I just wanted to help, I wanted to serve, I wanted to do whatever I could do for somebody. ... I never thought in a million years that any of that would in turn be put back for me.”

Lovington Assistant Fire Chief Derek Kidd, who served as acting chief for the department and acting president of the Nelson County Emergency Services Council during Johnson’s absence, said he was grateful to have the veteran chief back in those familiar roles.

“I was glad to see him back. I thought [Johnson’s recovery] was going to take a lot longer than it did,” Kidd said. “He’s impressed me with his improvement and he wanted to get back into things as quick as he could.”

Johnson resumed those roles at the beginning of the new year.

Kidd added while administrative and operational responsibilities typically are split evenly among chief and assistant chief, Johnson now handles a majority of administrative duties while Kidd picks up the slack on the operational side.

“I never had another option other than when I was going to get back on my feet. [God] left me here for a reason. He wasn’t finished with me and so I’m here,” Johnson said. “I intend to be whatever I can be for Him and this community just like I’ve always done.”

Head of drug trafficking operation in Nelson County pleads guilty, faces minimum 14 years

Nick Cropper

Jul 1, 2020

LOVINGSTON — A Roanoke man at the head of a drug trafficking operation in Nelson County that involved 11 other individuals pleading guilty, pleaded guilty Tuesday in Nelson Circuit Court.

Peter Jelf Porter, 53, who is also known as Christopher Gause Delroy and Semour Maxwell, pleaded guilty to two felony counts of racketeering and one count of distributing more than 100 grams of methamphetamine in Nelson County from July 2017 until he was indicted in February 2019. A fourth charge was dropped because of the terms of the plea agreement.

Porter faces a minimum active sentence of 14 years' incarceration.

The 11 other individuals who have also pleaded guilty include Porter's son, Jafari Porter; Shawn Baker; D. Camm Ragland IV; Katina Wood; Jennifer Pearce; Michael Shawn Craig; William Sturm; Sandra Shifflett; Donny Sprouse Jr.; Josh Painter and William Wood, according to a news release from Nelson County Commonwealth's Attorney Daniel Rutherford.

According to Rutherford, Porter trafficked more than 10 kilograms of meth into Nelson County from Roanoke. From there, he would sell the drug to three people: Painter, Ragland and Baker, who would then sell to those in the lower levels of the network.

Porter's defense attorney Chuck Felmlee said in court the defense did not necessarily agree with the 10-kilogram figure presented by the commonwealth.

At the height of Porter's operation, which Rutherford said began to take off around winter of 2018, Porter would traffic as much as one pound of meth into Nelson County every week.

Jafari Porter also assisted in meth distribution and collection of drug debt at times.

Peter Porter was arrested on outstanding indictments upon his arrival to Miami, Florida, from Jamaica, where he is originally from, in February 2019 with assistance from the U.S. Marshals, the release states.

In court, Felmlee expressed gratitude the commonwealth had agreed to amend Peter Porter's charges, but he said he still felt a minimum 14 year sentence was harsh given Porter's cooperation and the fact he has no previous criminal record.

Peter Porter is currently being held in the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail and is awaiting a pre-sentencing report. His sentencing will take place in the fall of 2020, the release states.

Nick Cropper covers Nelson County. Reach him at (434) 385-5522.

Nick Cropper covers Nelson County. Reach him at (434) 385-5522.