

Snowstorm cripples Fluvanna

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By Heather Michon
Correspondent

2022 got off to an exciting start for Fluvanna County, as a week of unseasonably warm temperatures gave way early Monday morning (Jan. 3) to a crippling winter storm that dumped the better part of a season's worth of snow on the area in the space of just a few hours.

Up to a foot of wet, heavy snow brought down trees and power lines, left motorists stranded on county roads, and caused major power outages that took hours, often days to bring back online. Some area homes remain without power a full week later.

Historic damage

The storm caused catastrophic damage to the power grid, leaving Dominion Power and Central Virginia Electric Cooperative (CVEC) struggling to get customers back online.

Crews worked 16-hour shifts in sub-freezing temperatures to clear trees off lines, install new poles, and get the power flowing back into homes and businesses.

In a Facebook post on Sunday night, CVEC called the damage "historic," rivaling the recovery from Hurricane Isabel in 2003 and the 2012 derecho. Over 75 percent of the company's 36,000 customers were offline following the storm.

"The January 2022 storm will go down as one of the major storm events in the history of CVEC[,] based on the number of accounts impacted, poles broken[,] and overall damage to CVEC facilities," they reported.

As of Sunday night, about 425 of its Fluvanna county customers were still without power. Dominion Energy and Appalachian Power Company had no reported outages according to the tracking website poweroutage.us.

Phone and internet providers were also impacted by the storm. At one point on Monday, CenturyLink service went out, temporarily cutting access to the county's 911 system.

First responders

Roads quickly became impassible as the snow mounted on Monday morning, and the Fluvanna County Sheriff's Office took to Facebook to beg residents to stay off the road.

"We are urging everyone to shelter in place," they posted shortly before 10:00 am. "Road conditions are extremely hazardous. We have multiple trees and power lines down throughout the county. We have very limited wrecker service [and] if you get stuck[,]there is a 2-3 hour wait time if they can reach you."

County fire and rescue went into action early Monday to help clear roads of downed trees and disabled vehicles, rescue stranded motorists, and deal with power lines that had caught fire as the electrical grid began to fail.

Later, they were called out for medical emergencies and carbon monoxide alarms, chimney fires, and downed trees on homes.

"To say we were busy would be an understatement," Lake Monticello Volunteer Fire & Rescue Chief Richard Constantino said in an email. Volunteers staffed the firehouse round-the-clock from late Sunday night to Wednesday morning. "At any one time, there were at least 21 firefighters on-duty, staffing all our apparatus and living in the firehouse."

And they were needed, with over 60 calls for service and five structure fires in the first 48 hours of the storm. Often, crews had to cut away trees and brush just to reach the homes in need of assistance.

All area fire and rescue crews faced considerable challenges, especially in the first 24 hours. Most volunteers worked non-stop for much of the week.

Warming stations become shelters

Temperatures fell from a high of around 62 degrees on Sunday to a low of 13 on Monday night into Tuesday.

To cope with these potentially life-threatening temperatures, the county opened up a warming station at the Fluvanna County High School on Tuesday, which was soon converted into an emergency shelter for those who remained without heat and electricity.

Assistant County Administrator Kelly Belanger Harris said that a dozen people used the warming station on Tuesday, 17 on Wednesday, and 15 on Thursday. Three people used the facility to shelter overnight.

“Essential Service”

Many businesses were forced to close for much of the week, but one that stayed open was Fluvanna ACE Hardware at Crofton Plaza on Lake Monticello Road.

Managers Jeff Craig and Renny Megahan, along with members of their staff, kept the store running despite having neither heat nor light nor phones. This allowed residents to access sand, salt, shovels, chainsaws, and other storm recovery tool as the clean-up began.

“We are tired, cold, hungry, and frustrated,” they posted on their Facebook page late Thursday afternoon. “However, we realize we are an essential business to this community in good times and bad. Therefore, we will reopen at 7 am tomorrow, power or no power.”

Their power was restored later that day, and by Friday, fresh stocks of firewood, propane, and other crucial items were coming back in stock.

The Food Lion at Turkeysag was re-opened by Tuesday, with EW Thomas back in business by late in the week. MACAA’s Food Bank was able to open by Saturday morning.

Community

As weather emergencies often do, the storm brought out the best in the community.

Neighbors helped neighbors clear fallen brush, pulled out their chainsaws to begin removing trees that had fallen across roads, and push stuck cars out of the snow-clogged streets. As some areas got their power back on, open calls went out on social media, inviting those who were still in the dark to come on over to warm up, recharge electronics, heat up food, even take a shower.

With the immediate crisis now past, the cleanup begins.

At Lake Monticello, which lost several hundred trees to the storm, the maintenance staff estimates it may take 4-6 months to clean up all the debris. LMOA News reports that staff will clear up to 15 feet from the edge of the roadway, leaving residents responsible for anything beyond that point.

There is, as yet, no estimate on the cost of the storm damage to the county.