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In Eastern Iowa, the City That 'Would Never Flood' Goes 12 Feet Under

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Scott Olson/Getty Images

Volunteers placing sandbags along a road Thursday in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. About 8,000 people had evacuated their homes, and 5,500 were without electricity.

CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa — They said this city would never flood. They talked about 1993, and 1966 and 1851, years when the Cedar River swelled and hissed but mostly stayed within its banks. They thought they were safe. They were wrong.

Cedar Rapids is experiencing the worst flooding in the city's history. And the water is still rising. By Thursday afternoon, the Cedar River was about 29 feet deep, or 17 feet above flood stage, according to the National Weather Service. The water was expected to rise another three feet by Friday morning, and reach a record crest, 12 feet higher than the previous record, set in 1851.

“Usually if you break a record, you only do it by an inch or two,” said Jeff Zogg, a hydrologist for the Weather Service in Davenport, Iowa. “But breaking it by six feet? That’s pretty amazing.”

The white T-shirt worn by Chuck Johnson, 56, was soaked to the neckline Thursday after he waded through floodwaters to his house to retrieve garbage bags packed with clothes. “We all thought this was a good place to live because it would never flood,” Mr. Johnson said.

The pain will not end anytime soon. With heavy thunderstorms rolling in Thursday evening, and more rain predicted for the weekend, flood waters were expected to remain high for at least the next seven or eight days, said Dave Koch, spokesman for the Cedar Rapids Fire Department.

“We’ve got serious problems,” said Justin Shields, a Cedar Rapids City Council member. “And we’ve got a long way to go yet.”

Most of downtown Cedar Rapids was underwater. That includes City Hall, the county courthouse and jail, all of which, in acts of civic hubris, were built on an island in the middle of the river.

“Well, the island is part of the river now,” said Mike Goldberg, the administrative services director for Linn County.

About 8,000 people have evacuated their homes, Mr. Koch said. And 5,500 were without electricity. Those whose power has been lost should expect to go without for a week or more as utility companies struggle to prevent further damage to their critical infrastructure, said Scott Drzycimski, a spokesman for Alliant Energy.

Power failures reduced the local water treatment plant to 25 percent of its capacity. At 6 p.m. Thursday, emergency management officials announced that Cedar Rapids residents were required to reduce their water use to drinking water only until further notice.

“We’ve lost most of the battles at this point,” Mr. Goldberg said. “At this point we’re just waiting for the water to crest so we can get started on recovery efforts.”

Railroad cars filled with rock ballast were parked atop a bridge just south of downtown to try to prevent the river from carrying the span away. By Thursday morning, the bridge lay toppled on its side, white water rushing over its girders. Volunteers and city workers filled sandbags for two days to build up an old levee on the northwest side of the city, Mr. Koch said. They succeeded in raising the height of the wall almost four feet, but on Thursday afternoon it was already two feet underwater.

Michelle Hilton held back tears as she walked from her mother’s house on 19th Avenue Southwest. When she first left the house, at 11 a.m. Thursday, brown water was lapping at the edge of the backyard. By 3:30 p.m., the basement was inundated and the weight of the water had cracked the foundation.

She hoped the water would just stop rising. When told that it would not, she started to cry.

“This is the house I grew up in,” said Ms. Hilton, 46. “I never thought I’d see anything like this. Never. Never.”

When Roger Nielson started packing his belongings into his car on Tuesday, he said, people on his block stood in their yards and laughed at him. As recently as Wednesday, his neighbor was mowing the grass.

When Mr. Nielson left for the last time Thursday, the water on the first floor was almost up to his knees. The river had another 11 feet to rise. “We were the lucky ones,” said Mr. Nielson, 40. “We got out.”

Jim Hovind’s house stood across the street from the Cedar River since 1890. The last time he saw it, water was pouring in the front door. “It got really scary,” said Mr. Hovind, 48. “We were the only ones left in the neighborhood.”

Demerrick Ankum drove to his house on 19th Avenue to save anything he could. By the time he finished packing, his car was underwater. He had to pay a neighbor, Louie Brundidge, \$10 to rescue him from the house in Mr. Brundidge’s red aluminum boat.

All that Mr. Ankum could carry with him was one blue plastic tub of clothes and a few framed photos of his children. Everything else was gone.

“I never even thought about flood insurance,” said Mr. Ankum, 33. “They said this place would never flood in 500 years.”



Steve Pope/Associated Press

Downtown Cedar Rapids was inundated by the raging Cedar River on Thursday. Heavy rain continued to pound parts of Iowa.