

Janesville officials planning for city to become 'disaster area'

By NEIL JOHNSON

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Photo 



Photo by [Bill Olmsted](#)

As the rain falls and the Rock River continues to rise, county officials have found it necessary to close S. River Road due to water over the pavement in several places.

JANESVILLE — The city of Janesville is putting in motion a flood action plan to respond to flood conditions on the Rock River that could rival those last seen in 2008.

Water levels above the Centerway dam in downtown are nearly at levels seen in the flood of May-June 2008, when the Rock River at Afton reached a record level of 13.5 feet, Interim City Administrator Jay Winzenz said in a city staff meeting Thursday morning.

Updated flood predictions from the United States Geologic Survey estimate that river levels at Afton could reach 12.8 feet by early next week. Rains are expected to continue in the area off and on through Friday, although heavier rains have veered south of the area, according to forecasts.

The city is preparing for the potential of the worst-case scenario, Winzenz said.

All departments are being asked to pitch in to the response, he said. The city plans to spare no expense to deal with the likelihood of major flooding.

"We have to do what we need to do at this point," Winzenz said. "If this gets to where it is supposed to get, I am sure this will be declared a disaster area."

The city's response could include street and city park closures, sandbagging, placement of flood barriers with pump stations, and the disabling of electric and gas utilities in key areas in the city, Winzenz said.

City crews were organizing the filling and placement of thousands of sandbags Thursday, with sandbagging efforts set to begin later Thursday morning at Traxler Park. Floodwaters there are beginning to encroach on the west lanes of North Main Street at the Memorial Street Bridge, according to city staff.

Officials are shutting down streets entering Riverside Park and closing the park. That will lead to cancellation or postponement of baseball games planned there.

The Rock Aqua Jays are pumping water from the organization's clubhouse, which is located along the river in Traxler Park, officials said. Traxler Park is being closed, and police patrols will be stationed at entrances there to block gawkers from entering to view water levels or sandbagging efforts.

Contaminated water, raw sewage from communities upstream and field runoff mingling with floodwaters are a hazard, Winzenz and other staff said. The city doesn't want residents milling around in flooded areas.

A few volunteers had “burned eyes” from contaminated water during other recent flood responses, a city staff member said.

“You need to be really careful on the water,” Winzenz told city staff.

Meanwhile, the city is meeting this morning with downtown business and property owners to discuss the flood response. Officials fear floodwaters could overwhelm storm sewers or top the seawall downtown.

The lot at Adams & Sons Roofing at 411 N. Main St. is beginning to flood, Winzenz said. That spot is considered by the city to be a bellwether in predicting whether the River could spill, although the city has rerouted storm sewer.

As a precaution, the city has shut down the east side riverwalk behind businesses on Main Street downtown. City crews are monitoring river levels at Hedberg Library, and pumps are being readied and are on call in case the river tops the seawall there, officials said.

The river is starting to come out of its banks at the Centerway Dam. City officials plan to get in touch with North American Hydro, the company that operates the dam, to bolster the area near the pump house so the land does not wash out in that area.

The city has requested 10,000 extra sandbags from the county, and crews plan to fill bags today, setting up a few pickup stations for the public today. The locations are not yet available, but the city is setting a 200-bag limit per resident.

Residents have not been evacuated, although people living along the east side of the river on North Parker Drive have begun sandbagging their backyards.

The Mole and Sadler subdivision south of Riverside Park is now flooding, although land in the path of floodwaters was cleared of homes wrecked in the 2008 flood, Winzenz said. One house remaining in the subdivision near the waterline is “an island,” with floodwater surrounding and flowing around it, officials said. It’s not clear whether anyone lives in the residence.

The City Clerk/Treasurer's office is setting up an emergency flood hotline. People with flood-related questions can call the hotline at 608-373-6000. The city's website will also have a flood alert and information page up and running later today.

Gazette staff will update this story as more details are available.

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