

Learning to cope

River crests, expected to fall over next several days

By Neil Johnson

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JANESVILLE

Even if floodwaters from the Rock River continue to cover South River Road in Janesville bumper-deep for the next several days, Wayne Sockriter has got the problem licked.

He's got a snorkel-mobile.

Sockriter, 28, a resident along the flood-riddled roadway has rigged his 1995 Chevrolet S-10 pickup truck with a flexible metal tube that curves out and extends straight up from the truck's rear exhaust pipe.

Well above floodwaters on South River Road that lapped at his truck's bumper, Sockriter's modified vehicle chugged out exhaust through the tubing Tuesday, popping and gurgling like a clogged basement drain. The truck sloshed through the two-foot deep floodwaters on the road with ease. From a child-safety seat in the truck, Sockriter's five-year-old daughter Monica waved out the window.

The system on his pickup allows Sockriter to keep the engine and exhaust dry as he fords the floodwaters. He still can reach work at United Alloy in Janesville, and he still can get Monica to the library in Janesville.

That is, unless the river rises any further. But according to forecasters, that is not likely.

At Lake Koshkonong, flooding on the river Tuesday had reached a crest of 12.4 feet, nearly a foot above major flood stage, according to federal river gauge data. The flood has left dozens of homes in subdivisions around Newville flooded, but water levels there have seemed to plateau.

In Janesville, the crest happened late last week, as waters upstream of the Centerway dam in downtown Janesville reached flood levels near those recorded in 2008, although no significant flooding on Main Street occurred this time around, Interim City Manager Jay Winzenz said.

At Afton, the river reached a peak of 11.8 feet Monday, but it fell to 11.6 feet Tuesday despite afternoon rains, according to river gauge readings.

For people in Newville whose homes are partway underwater and at Mole & Sadler's subdivision in Janesville, where the city has forced the evacuation of one home flooded in a low area, the flooding has been significant, but not as severe as the Rock River flood of May-June 2008.

Back then, water levels on the river reached 13.5 feet at Afton, according to river gauge data.

Over the next week, it appears there will be a break in the recent heavy rains that have plagued the area and overwhelmed the Rock River watershed.

This will lessen the chance that waters will climb any higher along the river, forecasters said.

But it is likely that local residents such as Sockriter, the snorkel-mobile owner, will be stuck with major to moderate flood conditions for several days as floodwater levels plateau along parts of the Rock River and finally begin a slow retreat, forecasters said.

“It’ll kind of flat-line for a while and start to head down between Friday and Saturday. The Rock River responds pretty slowly,” said Morgan Brooks, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service who has tracked recent flooding along the Rock River.

Brooks said the ground is so saturated that it is essentially a floating aquifer, and it’s going to take days for the Rock River to move floodwaters through its 3,500 square-mile drainage basin.

She said it could take hardhit areas south of Janesville and around Newville several days—if not up to two or three weeks—before river levels drop to even moderate or minor flood stages.

“And that’s assuming we don’t have another 3-incher (rainfall),” Brooks said.

Chris Hart, who lives in the flooded Mallwood Estates subdivision along the flooded west shoreline of Lake Koshkonong, hopes Brooks’ forecast is correct.

For his own health and the happiness of his pit bull-lab mix Xena, he can’t afford the river to go any higher. It’s already lapping under his deck, and it’s filling the basement of his split-level house on East Road Six.

Hart, a retired UPS driver from Chicago, is diabetic and undergoes kidney dialysis at home five days a week. He said he still has electricity, but has no gas and no heat except for a space heater. If the water goes any higher, Hart said, the power company will cut the electricity, and he’ll be forced to evacuate the house.

“Then I’ll have to go to a facility for dialysis. And there you can only get dialysis three days a week,” Hart said. “Three days a week, and my blood don’t get clean.”

Meanwhile, Hart’s dog Xena has to trot down a series of pallets stacked above the two-and-a-half foot high floodwaters along the house just to get to find a dry spot in the grass to do her business.

“When she’s got to go, it’s the neighbor’s yard for now,” Hart said. “She’ll be all right, though. I think it’s not going to come up much higher. We’re OK.”

In Janesville, Winzenz said the city was prepared for the worst-case scenario—floods equaling or surpassing the flood of 2008, when the river water drowned downtown, left part of Mole & Sadler’s subdivision decimated and dumped spawning carp onto Main Street.

None of that happened again.

Although part of the river walk on the east side of Main Street flooded, power remained on, and sewers downtown seemed to handle the influx of floodwaters.

Still, Winzenz said, the city did hand out 5,500 sandbags to residents, and had 12,000 on hand for the deluge. The biggest areas hit by the flood were Traxler and Riverside parks, Winzenz said.

Now a bigger task is at hand, Winzenz said: Cleanup.

“We’re kind of waiting for the floodwaters to recede at this point, and we’ll kick into clean-up mode. We’ll be doing water testing now to see if the paved services and soil will need any decontamination,” Winzenz said.

He said he does not believe cleanup will be as big an undertaking as it was in 2008, although workers have not yet inspected city buildings in some of the low-lying areas along the river.

The biggest issue is the specter of dirty, contaminated floodwaters. Winzenz said workers are in no hurry to wade into it.

“You could put on boots and just go in, but it’s best to stay out of that water right now,” he said.



Above: Water flows over residential driveways across the street from the Rock River on South River Road on Tuesday.



Left: Wayne Sockriter poses with his snorkeltruck he rigged up to drive through floodwater.

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Wayne Sockriter drives through floodwater on South River Road, demonstrating his snorkel-rigged exhaust system on his pickup. The set-up keeps him mobile and his truck's engine dry.

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