

Friday, May 10, 2013

## North Shore Inn back open Floodwaters recede slowly, but surely

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With spring's floodwaters hopefully receding, life for waterfront residents is beginning to return to normal.

That is, if you can ignore the thousands of sandbags still nestled among the flower gardens and front stoops throughout the county.

The National Weather Service reports that area waterways crested at their second-highest historical levels in Fort Atkinson and at Lake Koshkonong, and reached their third-highest recorded level in Jefferson.

The rainy days and rising rivers paralyzed high school sports and closed roads and businesses, but as the waters began to pull back, one of the surest signs of life returning to its normal rhythms took place on Friday, May 3. That is when the North Shore Inn, located just feet away from Lake Koshkonong in dry times, reopened for business.

"You never get used to your business getting shut down," said Darlene Maasz, the restaurant's co-owner. "That's one of the hardest things."

Darlene and Dwight Maasz, siblings who took over the business from their parents in 1975, say they have had to close the supper club due to high water only three times in their 37 years. This year, they shut the doors for more than two weeks.

Doing so was not a decision they took lightly, especially since the record flooding five years ago remains a clear memory.

"That took years to recover (from 2008), for people to know that we were open," said Dwight. "As a matter of fact, we had some people coming in probably in the last three months that said 'we didn't know you were open anymore.'"

Summer marks North Shore Inn's busiest season, but with roads leading to the restaurant shut down and water beginning to creep up around the building, the Maaszes had no choice but to close.

Miraculously, the building stayed high and dry inside.

"We have blue tape on the stake out there, and the water has to get up to 13.3 feet on the gauge by Oxbow Road before water will get in the building," said Dwight.

Lake Koshkonong crested at 12.39 feet this year, leaving almost a foot to spare.

Dwight anxiously checked the river levels several times daily, and determined that the water would recede enough to open by May 3.

"I had to look at the river gauge, look at the weather forecast, and decide whether the water was going to get low enough by Friday that we could open up, because you've got to have time to make all that food," he said. "You can't just jump out of bed one day and say 'We're opening up.' So it was a very stressful decision."

A good crowd packed their dining room for the reopening, but Darlene believes they would have had customers all the way through the flooding had they committed to keeping the kitchen open.

"We had one year when (the water) had come up enough to fill our parking lots. But our customers, when they called, they said 'We'll put our boots on and come up.' And they did," she recalled. "They said 'We want you open.'"

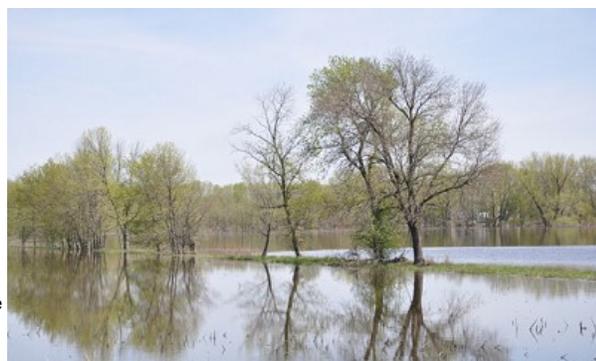
Loyal customers won't have any trouble getting to the restaurant now, as roads around the county begin to open up. All roads within the City of Jefferson are now open, although portions of Willow, Lamp and Black Hawk Island roads in the Town of Sumner, and Bark River Road in the Town of Koshkonong, remain closed.

In general, Jefferson County Emergency Management director Donna Haugom said, the flooding forecast is cautiously optimistic.

"Things are looking up. We're going to get a little rain, but I don't think it's going to affect us a whole lot," she said. "I'm a little nervous because it's only May, so we have the next two months to get through to make sure that we're going to be holding our own and doing OK."

The flood of 2008 occurred after a heavy rainfall in June, so Haugom said this might be too early in the season for property owners to remove their sandbags entirely.

"I'm hoping that maybe even if they take their sandbags down, they don't necessarily get rid of them at this point," Haugom said. "To try to work the process all over again and try to get things up and running again is hard. I would wait until the end of June to see where we're going."



Above: Although it is receding, the Rock River still fills fields along State Highway 106 east of Fort Atkinson. Below: North Shore Inn is high and dry.



In addition, the state of emergency declaration the county submitted to the state will be rescinded at the May 14 county board of supervisors. That submission would have allowed Jefferson County to request additional resources from the state and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but now those resources likely will not be needed.

This season's high-water marks might have rivaled records had it not been for the fact that an April 17 storm, forecast to bring several inches of water to Jefferson County, blew south into Illinois.

"I'm telling you, on the 17th when I was home, I kissed my wife and kids good bye because I didn't know when I would see them again," said Jefferson City Administrator Tim Freitag. "I thought, "This is going to be bad.

"And then it just all missed us. Chicago got hit. That was our storm; that was what was forecast here," he added.

As a low-lying city at the confluence of the Crawfish and Rock rivers, Jefferson has witnessed high water before, so officials were prepared to deal with the challenge.

"We had a lot of meetings early and we talked about a lot of things. We had everything pretty well lined up and ready to go if we needed to," said Jefferson Police Department Capt. Mike Drew. "The real struggle was just making the decision."

With the decision made, the city focused the efforts of every department on combating the high water. More than 450 volunteers helped to fill 15,000 sandbags to be placed within the city limits, with another 3,000 filled for later use. A "strike team" of prisoners from a nearby state prison was on hand to help fill and place bags for residents who were physically unable to do so themselves.

Freitag estimates the total cost of the flood response at \$30,000, some of which might be covered by Wisconsin state disaster funding. The city had declared an emergency, making it eligible to receive funding from the state to help cover the costs of recovering from the flood.

Overall though, Freitag said, the city's response helped lower the financial cost of the flooding.

"I think the city, its employees, along with the fire department, we did our best, and I think those efforts helped minimize the effects of the flooding from being worse than they were," the city administrator said. "And I think it's also true you have to be prepared. It's not like you want to tell the public "We'll try better next time."

Jefferson has begun making plans for a citywide sandbag removal system, which it hopes to have finished by Memorial Day (see related story on page 7).

Jefferson County, meanwhile, is seeking a permit from the state Department of Natural Resources for disposing of the thousands of sandbags currently placed around the county. If approved, this will allow municipalities to collect the sandbags for burial in a county-owned gravel pit, the same procedure used in 2008.

The City of Fort Atkinson currently has no firm plans to help property owners removing sandbags, but officials say they do plan to work with the county to dispose of the sandbags. More details will be announced at a later date.

The city has begun removing the sand piles and will store the sand for future use at a city facility.

Fort Atkinson City Manager Evelyn Johnson said homeowners should use their discretion in deciding whether it is safe to remove sandbags around their home at this point.

The Town of Koshkonong also will be cooperating with the county for sandbag disposal. Throughout the course of the flooding, public works crews in Koshkonong moved approximately 230 tons of sand and 13,000 sand bags.

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