

Heavy rains, frost combine to prompt flooding countywide

By Alexa Zoellner and Ryan Whisner Union staff writers | Posted: Wednesday, February 21, 2018 9:11 am

The cities of Fort Atkinson, Jefferson and Whitewater experienced various stages of flooding throughout Tuesday due to rain and the frozen ground.

“The fact that the ground was frozen is what is working against us,” Fort Atkinson City Engineer Andy Selle said. “We already had a bunch of snow on the ground, probably a quarter inch of water sitting in the snow and then we had all this rain on top of that. The whole city is like a parking lot because no water can get into the ground.”

He estimated that approximately 1.8 inches of rain had fallen in a 24-hour period.

Selle said there had not been many reports of flooding on the streets.

“What I’m getting calls about is water in people’s backyards that is flowing through between houses that they usually don’t see,” he said. “The reason they don’t see it is because, typically, it soaks into the ground. They are seeing a situation right now is that their backyard and everyone up-slope of them is a parking lot.”

Selle said there was an issue along the alley between Elm and South streets where water was nearing a garage and the city pumped it out to Main Street to get it into the storm sewer system.

Also, he said, there is a low spot along an alley between Monroe and Robert streets. He said that homeowner had his own pump.

“We had some issues on South Main by Purdy (Elementary) school because the pipe was surcharged, meaning that it’s completely full,” Fort Atkinson Public Works Superintendent Kent Smith said. “We also had some more issues up on Shawnee. Again, the pipe was surcharged and couldn’t take the volume of water that was coming with the event.”

Empty sandbags and sand are available free of charge at the Public Works office at 700 James Place.

Meanwhile, Jefferson City Engineer/Public Works Director Bill Pinnow shared similar accounts during



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the Jefferson Common Council meeting Tuesday night.

“As expected, with the amount of rain that we’ve gotten, combined with frozen ground, we’ve gotten several calls today from residents who are seeing some flooding conditions,” Pinnow said. “Public Works crews, at this point, have been spending the majority of their time (Tuesday) — as well as what they’ll be doing (today) — jetting storm sewers, clearing inlets in some of the problem areas we’ve gotten reports of flooding.”

He said that sandbags are available on a first-come, first-serve basis in two locations: the Public Works garage at 1122 Tensfeldt Ave. and the back parking lot of the Jefferson Fire Department.

“At this point, we do not have any large-scale plans, but we will continue to evaluate the situation,” Pinnow said. “If those sandbags run out, we do have additional sandbags we can continue to place at those locations.

“City staff have been notified of those locations so, in the case that people do call city hall, those are where we’re directing them to,” he added. “If it becomes more of a larger-scale event, we’ll certainly be talking with P.D., fire department and continue to re-evaluate.”

Across the county, Jefferson County Emergency Management Director Donna Haugom said she has been dealing mostly with towns where there’s “a lot of runoff.”

“A lot of them (residents) need pumps to pump the water out of their yards to another location so it doesn’t come up to the house,” Haugom said. “There are some properties that are sandbagging.”

County Highway K was closed Tuesday and this morning from Star School Road to the Rock County line, she said.

“We’ve got three different things going on,” Haugom said. “The frozen ground, snowmelt and then the rain that we’ve been getting are the three contributing factors to what we’re dealing with now.

“A lot of people that are experiencing high water now probably have never had high water before,” she added.

The director noted that there is more precipitation expected Thursday into Friday and that “probably” could cause more flooding.

“People are kind of holding their own right now,” Haugom said. “They’ve gotten pretty well settled, but I don’t know what Thursday’s precipitation is going to bring.”

None of Jefferson County’s rivers have reached flood stage, although some locations have projections to become close to that level before slowly declining.

Haugom said it is unlikely the rivers will flood.

“I’ve gone through the hydrological page at the National Weather Service and the highest they’ll go is near flood stage,” she said. “This is going through Friday and then they’re all anticipated to start going down by Tuesday.”

A flood warning remains in effect for the Rock River in Watertown.

Southern Walworth and southeastern Rock counties also were included in the flood warning. Much of south-central and southeastern Wisconsin was under a flood warning or watch on Tuesday.

In Green and Rock counties, some roads were flooded and closed, the National Weather Service said.

In Rock County, the sheriff’s department said there were flooding issues countywide.

Jefferson County issued a slow/no wake order in June for the portion of the Rock River downstream from the Dodge/Jefferson County line to Lake Koshkonong. It covers all rivers and streams within the county; lakes are under the jurisdiction of the local municipality.

Along the Rock River, the order continues south into Rock County, where ordinance requires the slow/no-wake restriction when Rock River water levels exceed eight feet on Lake Koshkonong and 6.5 feet on the river at Afton.

Gauges on Thursday showed levels of 8.58 feet on Lake Koshkonong and 8.24 feet at Afton.

To date, no parks in Jefferson County have been closed due to high water. Officials regularly monitor the situation at Kanow Park on Rock River Road, Town of Ixonia; Rock River Park along County Highway B, Johnson Creek; and Cappie’s Landing on Jefferson Road, Watertown.

Monitors for the Rock River are located in Watertown, Jefferson, Fort Atkinson and Lake Koshkonong. The Crawfish and Bark rivers have their own monitors in Milford and Rome, respectively.

Along the Rock River in Watertown, the water levels were at 5.15 feet this morning, having crested just below flood stage of 5.5 feet Tuesday. At flood stage, there is widespread lowland flooding in rural areas around Watertown. Current projections suggest it will remain around that level over the next few days and possibly reach moderate flood stage.

Downstream in the City of Jefferson, the Rock River water gauge remains below the 10-foot flood stage at 7.18 feet. Water levels are projected to rise to 8.5 feet into next week.

The water level in Fort Atkinson was recorded at 13.95.02 feet this morning. It is projected to rise to around 15.5 feet by late Friday before declining later into next week.

Flood stage is 16 feet. At that level, high waters affect some parkland and overflows the lowest riverbanks in Fort Atkinson.

Record levels were seen in June 2008 when the Rock River reached 20.9 feet in Fort Atkinson.

All current river forecasts take into account past precipitation and any rain expected within the next 24 hours. However, due to the cold temperatures, gauge readings might be inaccurate.

Prior to 2008, based on Daily Union archives, it was the flood in 1929 that topped the record books in Fort Atkinson. The recording gauge at the Rock River in Fort Atkinson was installed in 1998 and the method of recording the levels was altered.

Historically, crests in 1929, 1979, 1959 and 1993, respectively, generally have been considered to be among the highest levels recorded. Additional high-water marks occurred in April 2008, June 2004, April 2009 and July 2010.

Downstream on Lake Koshkonong, water levels were recorded at 6.58 feet. At 10 feet, water spreads into low-lying areas around Lake Koshkonong and is considered flood level. The record level, set in June 2008, is 15.12 feet.

Current projections show water levels hitting about 9.8 feet next Tuesday, maintaining that level for a couple of days before slowly declining later in the week.

At Newville, in Rock County, the water levels were recorded this morning at 2.97 feet. Flood stage is 6.5 feet.

For the Crawfish River at Milford, the latest gauge reading was 4.42 feet, well below the minor flood stage level of seven feet. Current projections show a crest of approximately 5.5 feet, however it might be below that.

As with other monitoring stations within Jefferson County, the record high along the Crawfish River was recorded in June 2008 at 13.59 feet. Previous records were in 1959, 11.15 feet, and 1979, 10.06 feet.

The Bark River was reported at 3.19 feet, below the record high of 4.59 feet in 2008 and just above “action” stage.