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LAKE-EFFECT STORM

DIGGING OUT

Snow Belt residents work to clear their roofs and driveways
and to prepare for flooding

BY MAKI BECKER AND LOU MICHEL / NEWS STAFF REPORTERS



Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

Crews clear the off ramp of the 219 at Armor Duells Road in Orchard Park on Friday. By late Friday most of the major highways that had been closed were open to traffic.

Amanda Enright and her husband, Joe, woke up Friday morning in their ranch home in Elma to find cracks along the walls where they meet the ceiling. Overnight, at least another foot of snow had fallen on top of the five to six feet that were already piled on their roof.

The fire department told them they had to do something fast. The Enrights got their three children out of the house and Amanda put out a plea for help on Facebook. Her nephew who lives nearby came. Then friends in Amherst rode down Transit Road to come to the rescue.

One by one, they climbed up and started heaving snow off the roof. In three hours, it was clear.

It was a day of digging out.

Across the Snow Belt on Friday people stripped down to their shirt sleeves and soldiered on with the endless, backbreaking work of shoveling snow that towered above their heads.

That's no exaggeration.

New snow totals for the back-to-back storms this week were announced by the National Weather Service.

They're officially over the 7-foot mark.

The highest logged in the area: a staggering 88 inches in Cowlesville in Wyoming County, just over the Erie County border near Marilla.

Hamburg took the dubious honor as Erie County's snow capital, with 79.5 inches measured at 11 a.m. Friday morning. West Seneca was a close second, with 78 inches, and Lancaster logged 74.

As the snow removal slowly progressed, the devastation of the two storms became clearer.

The death toll from the storm climbed to 13.

Late Friday night officials announced that a 68-year-old Cheektowaga man died of a heart attack while clearing snow from his driveway.

Police investigations were underway into the deaths of two men who were found inside cars buried deep in snow, including one near a Cheektowaga parking lot Friday morning.

Both the victims had called AAA for help during the storm, but that help never arrived.

The storm cleanup has already cost Erie County government \$2 million, County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz said Friday night, and the cost is rising.

As roads were cleared Friday, abandoned cars, some burned out, could be seen in ditches.

Poloncarz also said more than 500 cars have been towed from snow-clogged streets so far and taken to three different lots, where their owners can locate them by checking on the county's website, www.erie.gov.

At least 30 major roof collapses were reported across the region, many of them on barns and other agricultural buildings.

But the ocean of snow seemed to be starting to subside Friday as high-lift front-loaders were able to make at least one if not two passes through many snow-clogged streets, and plows that had been powerless in chest-high snow were finally being put to use.

In South Buffalo alone, more than 35,000 tons of snow had been hauled away in trucks and dumped into an increasingly mountain-like mound by the Central Terminal on the East Side.

The Thruway, closed since Tuesday from the Pennsylvania border to Henrietta, reopened just before 3 p.m. Friday. Some exits remained inaccessible, confusing drivers who hopped on the moment they could. Traffic tie-ups were almost immediately reported, including congestion at Route 219 just after it had reopened.

Amazingly, almost all the major highways that had been shut down were back open. The only one to remain closed as of Friday night was Route 5 from Blasdell to the Niagara Thruway entrance in downtown Buffalo.

But travel bans remained in place for Marilla, Elma, the town and village of Orchard Park, Evans, the Village of Blasdell, the town and village of Hamburg, Lackawanna, the Town of Alden, South Buffalo, Brant, Eden, Aurora, East Aurora and Angola.

That had law enforcement officers pleading with residents to stay put if at all possible.

"Stay in your homes," Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo asked increasingly impatient residents.

For some, there was no choice, as they remained snowbound in their homes. Some faced new frustrations as passing payloaders and plows barreled through streets, creating new walls of snow at the foot of driveways that had just been cleared.

"We are unable to get out to a store as we live on a major highway that we are not being allowed to walk on as it is unsafe," wrote Debbie May of Big Tree Road in Orchard Park in an email begging for help. "No one can get in to help us. We have been literally barricaded in since Tuesday. The stadium a half mile down the road is getting a lot of press, but we are being ignored as the street is being considered as 'cleared.' We need help, yet none seems to be on the way."

People put aside jitters about heights and hauled their shovels and snowblowers up onto their roofs. But it wasn't just cracks in the walls and creaking, popping sounds that motivated them.

Weather forecasters were warning that rain was

in the forecast and that the snow engulfing tens of thousands of homes across the heart of Erie County would act as a sponge, soaking up the water and adding even more weight to overtaxed roofs.

At the Garden Gate Health Care Facility on Union Road in Cheektowaga – where some 173 residents were evacuated Thursday and one elderly patient with health problems died after being relocated – two dozen Centimark Commercial Roofing workers manned shovels and snowblowers on the massive flat roof.

Sections of old roofing membrane were cut in oversized squares that were piled high with snow and then dragged to the edge of the roof and dumped into the parking lot below.

It was a slow job and work was expected to continue through Monday, according to assistant foreman Anthony Tidd.

At the U.S. Postal Service's Lancaster-Depew Carrier Annex on Como Park Boulevard, where engineers found a half-inch structural bend in the roof, roofers heaved snow into a giant metal box, filling it one ton at a time. A crane lowered it to the ground so it could be emptied.

"I've lifted eight tons of snow off this roof in the last two hours and we've hardly made a dent," said Jeff Peterson, operator of the Clark Rigging and Rental crane.

By Sunday as temperatures rise into the 50s, that monstrous snowpack is expected to start melting. A flood watch was issued starting at 1 p.m. Sunday.

Northtowns communities practically untouched by the twin lake-effect storms, including Williamsville and Clarence, began preparations for flooding, urging residents to keep storm drains clear and remove valuables from the basement.