

Storm's surreal mess shocks Ross Valley

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Looking around during the worst of it, cars and Dumpsters and large trees could be seen floating down one street or another on dark, muddy rivers raging through the streets of Fairfax and San Anselmo, two of the Marin towns most severely hit by the powerful storm that slammed into the county Friday night.

But other sights, some equally surreal, others just disjointed and messy, made it clear that no Ross Valley community escaped the storm's seemingly relentless waves of destruction, made all the more dramatic and fearsome because they occurred under the cover of darkness, heard but not seen.

A 45-foot-tall uprooted tree smashed the backstop at the baseball diamond on Ross Common, many front yards along Shady Lane were filled with standing water, and numerous vehicles were stranded in enormous puddles several feet deep and hundreds of feet long along the Magnolia Avenue corridor that connects the central Marin communities along their western borders.

San Anselmo appeared to suffer the worst damage after more than 4 feet of water rushed like a river down San Anselmo Avenue, flooding shops and restaurants. Fairfax appeared to be hit hard by mudslides that took their toll on residences along Wood Lane and Tamalpais Road in particular.

Perhaps underscoring the helplessness that many felt as the storm had its way with anything in its

path, was a former Fairfax City Council member, standing with an empty sandbag in his hand at 6 a. m. looking fruitlessly and forlornly for some sand to fill it.

Mike Ghiringhelli said, "There was virtually no sand left, and I was surprised. We had sandbags but no sand." The evening before, there had been a large pile of sand there; it apparently had been washed away by floodwaters overnight.

On Tamalpais Road, resident Craig Zellers, 43, was clearing away some mud on his property when he heard a rumbling sound.

"I looked up to see a wall of mud 3 or 4 feet high coming down the street, pushing trees and cars, moving at a good rate of speed," and heading in his direction, he said. Also being carried by the mud was a car. He picked up his 9-year-old son and jumped up on the stairs leading to his home.

Zellers said the car came to rest at the edge of the steep street with the front end teetering over the side. He also said a person got out of the car and apparently was not injured.

In Ross, disbelief was not uncommon. Neither were criticisms of the town.

"I'm just amazed this happened," said Don Ahrens, owner of Eddie's grocery store.

Ahrens is inclined to blame environmentalists, Ross residents and others for standing in the way of efforts to re-engineer Corte Madera Creek to prevent floods.

"It's all Ross' fault," said Larkspur resident Ron Stolowitz, whose house and car were flooded out. "Anyone there whose house is blown over deserves it, and you can quote me on that."

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San Anselmo Town Administrator Debbie Stutsman said no major injuries were reported, but two people were treated for hypothermia after being rescued from their stranded cars. Aside from that, there were no problems between people.

Marin Sanitary has brought trucks and Dumpsters into downtown, Ghilloti Brothers is using its construction vehicles to pick up debris, and firefighters were hosing off sidewalks because there was so much mud that it was dangerous for people to walk around.

"People seem to be pulling together," she said. "There's a lot of volunteering going on."

Stutsman said council members and town officials were walking the streets offering help, and a state of emergency was called to enable the town to apply for federal and state disaster relief funds. She said Town Hall and the police headquarters were damaged.

"At one point, we saw two Dumpsters floating down San Anselmo Avenue," she said.

San Anselmo Chamber of Commerce President Connie Rogers said the chamber spent six hours calling business owners Friday night to warn them about the imminent flood. She said they recommended placing 25 sandbags in front of the door to each business, but that was almost good for nothing.

"It was to no avail because it went right over the sandbags," she said.

Rogers was helping clean out the inside of the upscale antique business La Sede Bella, located next door to Town Hall. Mud covered the floor, and water marks were visible on tables, rolls of expensive fabrics and other merchandise.

Rogers said the owner had installed a flood gate Friday night, but it actually turned into a problem. Water rushing down the street broke out the front windows and poured inside the building, and the flood gate prevented it from leaving.

The flood entered into the realm of disbelief for Marny Delaney, owner of Doodlebug pottery studio who is no stranger to misfortune. The business was gutted during a fire on Christmas Eve 2003, and she reopened in June 2004.

Pottery, bottles of paint, stuffed animals and other merchandise was scattered so badly that Delaney and her army of friends had to clear paths just to reach the back of the store. Even then, standing water and mud covered the floor.

"The two huge kilns even moved," she said in amazement. "It was flowing that fast."

When asked whether she had the energy to rebuild again, she said, "I sure hope so."

In Ross, water 3 feet deep ran down Sir Francis Drake Boulevard and blew down a huge wooden gate across the entrance to a home. Swimming pools filled with mud, and standing water filled the lawn in front of Town Hall.

"This is the worst I've ever seen it," said Fred Rinaldi, who lives at 20 Sir Francis Drake Blvd. across from the house where the gate was blown down.

Eddie's grocery store owner, who lives next door to his Ross market, said he removed all the food, liquor and other merchandise from the lower shelves in the store Friday night. Although that helped limit the damage, mud still covered the floor. In the back stockroom, which is a few feet lower than the main store floor, cases of soda and bags of food

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floated in floodwater.

"I was up all night watching in agony," he said.

Ahrens said he wasn't sure if he would stay in business. He said it's frustrating because this happens every few years, and the city of Ross does little in terms of flood prevention.

Meanwhile, throughout Ross Valley, people could be seen trying to assess what had happened during the night. Children played in the water, as their parents watched. In one spot, a motorist plowed through a flooded street, submerging the vehicle's hood in water.

"Awful," said Larkspur resident Pat Hagen, who watched a truck drive over yellow caution tape blocking the road before speeding through the standing water. "They turn legally stupid."

At 19 Broadway in Fairfax, co-owner Chris McCarthy surveyed the damage left by a 2-foot stream of water that poured through the center of the bar at about 6 a.m.

"Are you kidding me?" he said, "We could have been trout fishing in here."

He finished scraping some mud off the side of the bar and then turned to pour a customer a mid-morning drink.

"Hell or high water, we never close," he said.

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