



A quarter-mile of the ice jam was removed from Sand Creek by the Jordan Public Works Department and S.M Hentges and Sons, a local excavation contractor. The ice was dumped in Holzer Park.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL STRASBURG

Moving on

How Jordan responded to the flood, and what's downstream

BY MICHAEL STRASBURG
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Life is beginning to look a little more normal in Valley Green Park in Jordan. People have returned to their homes after more than three feet of standing floodwater receded into Sand Creek and surrounding wetlands.

The quiet, now soggy trailer park is a far cry from the emergency staging area it was transformed into March 14.

Since the crisis has passed and all residents are now safe, Jordan Police Chief Brett Empey, who was tasked with coordinating the emergency response,

talked about the flood that evacuated the trailer court.

"This is my 21st spring thaw in the city of Jordan and I've never seen anything like this ever before," Empey said last week at a flood planning and forecast meeting at the Scott County Law Enforcement Center.

Empey described in detail the emergency response to six-day flooding event. The cause of the flooding, according to Empey, was a massive ice jam that floated down Sand Creek and clogged up outside the Valley Green Park.

"It was solely ice jam related — 110 percent ice jam related," Empey said.

Upstream ice accumulated and formed

an ice jam more than a mile long and 150 feet wide in Jordan. Chunks of ice removed from the river were 2.5 to nearly 4 inches thick.

"The slabs were massive. They were anywhere from 50 yards to two feet wide," Empey said.

As the ice moved downstream, it jammed up on the northeast side of the city. Soon after the river was clogged with ice, water quickly flooded the area near Valley Green Park.

"I got home at about 5 o'clock that night," Empey said. "I had time to make a pizza for my kid, and I got a phone call

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Councilman suspended

Council suspends Will from committee

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Easing congestion

MnDOT adds lane to portion of Highway 169

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Ready, set, go!

High hopes for track & field

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Nailed it

Speech team wins conference championship

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FLOOD

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at about 5:35 saying the road was flooded and trailers were compromised. So it happens really quick.”

When Empey went home, the river was elevated to 7 feet. By 5:30 p.m. it was up to 12 feet, rising four feet in about 30 minutes.

“It was super, super, super fast. There was nothing we could’ve done to prevent it at the time,” Empey said.

Once Empey arrived at Valley Green, he radioed the fire department and initiated an evacuation shortly before 6 p.m. A wireless emergency alert was sent out at 6:51 p.m.

“We had already kind of pre-planned for an evacuation of Valley Green based on the 2014 event when we weren’t as prepared,” Empey said.

That planning included communicating with the school district and bus company to provide shelter and transportation for evacuees. Pre-determined shelter locations included the high school and Community Education and Recreation Center. Empey called Jordan Superintendent Matt Helgerson to inform him the high school would need to be prepared as a shelter location.

“He called the school bus company for me,” Empey said. “They arrived in about five or 10 minutes. We had a couple buses there and a couple more came shortly



‘The entrance to Valley Green Park at 6:33 p.m. on March 14.

thereafter.”

A temporary shelter was staffed and ready to open at Jordan High School by 7:28 p.m. Four firefighters accompanied each busload to the high school. Around the same time, firefighters were issued maps of Valley Green and systematically swept the trailer park to evacuate residents. Since the evacu-

ation was voluntary, emergency personnel recorded which residents evacuated and which elected to stay.

As the first evacuation bus arrived, Empey realized he’d overlooked one aspect: pets. He immediately called Scott Haas, Scott County director of emergency management and communications. Haas told Empey the county had

recently purchased kennels, which were taken to the Scott County Association for Leadership and Efficiency facility north of Jordan.

Volunteers were dispatched to stage a pet shelter at the facility. In the meantime, pets in a corralled area inside a large garage building were monitored by staff until Scott County volunteers transported the animals to the pet shelter at SCALE. Fourteen dogs and one cat were evacuated and sheltered overnight.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Fourteen dogs and one cat were evacuated and sheltered overnight at the Regional Training Facility.

“It’s a good thing we did because we had a lot of pets coming out with people,” Haas said.

By nightfall, most evacuees and pets were transported.

“Pretty much the north half of the trailer park evacuated,” Empey said. “I think there were eight or 10 (residents of) trailers that elected to stay on the north half.”

Empey said the north half of the park was covered with one- to three-and-a-half feet

of water. At one point the water was even too deep for the school buses to drive through, as they started to overheat.

Evacuees were first transported by bus to the high school, Empey said, where Scott County officials logged individuals and checked them into the shelter. At the same time, the American Red Cross arrived and set up an overnight shelter at the

Flood to 3 ►



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PHOTO BY MICHAEL STRASBURG

Slabs of ice that made up the jam were two to four inches thick and ranged in size from 2 feet to 50 yards wide.

FLOOD

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CERC across the road. Seventy-eight evacuees registered at Jordan High School between 7:30 and 11 p.m.

“It worked out really, really well because we were able to initially shelter away from where the setup was happening, so the setup was a lot more conditioned having it at the secondary location,” Empey said.

Jordan High School Spanish teacher Amy Peters and paraprofessional Maria Bahe spent several hours at the high school translating information to Spanish-speaking families who evacuated the park. The two relayed official information and helped communicate family needs to emergency response personnel.

“There was a family with a young child who needed milk, so I helped show them where the fridge was in the staff lounge to keep their milk cold,” Peters said. “If they had questions about things going on I would speak Spanish with them.”

After all evacuees were transported and logged, they were moved to the CERC shelter for the night.

“One-hundred and forty-five trailers initially had evacuated by our means,” Empey said. “That doesn’t include ones that self-evacuated or drove out prior to us having buses there. I think only 40 stayed the first night. All the rest found alternative means — family, hotels, etc. In total, you’re probably looking at 300, 400 people.”

CLEARING THE JAM

With evacuees safe in the CERC shelter, Empey sat



COURTESY PHOTO

Seventy-eight evacuees registered at Jordan High School between 7:30 and 11 p.m. Evacuees were later transported to the Community Education and Recreation Center for overnight lodging.

down with Jordan Public Works Director Scott Haas to discuss how to deal with the ice jam causing the flood. Empey said after brainstorming ideas, they sought input from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the National Guard, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Minnesota State Patrol.

“We thought of dynamite, we thought of dropping water from helicopters onto the head of this ice jam to get it to move, we contacted MnDOT — they have a huge spider-like backhoe contraption that’s meant for going through swampy areas. But everybody told us it was too dangerous to go where they needed to go,” Empey said. “It was a mile and a quarter long ice jam, about 150 feet wide and it was packed completely solid, and to get to the end of it the water was about six to eight feet deep we figured. Nobody would go into it just because of the danger.”

Just as emergency person-

nel were figuring out what to do with the Valley Green ice jam, another jam was forming near the Highway 169 bridge in Jordan, pushing water levels up to 12 feet near downtown.

“Twelve feet gets us to about where our non-certified dike that runs from Highway 282 to Highway 169 is pretty much maxed out, so we were in a situation where we were about three inches from spilling into our business district.”

The response team tried to get long-stick backhoes, which extend farther and can reach across the creek to grab and clear ice from the waterway. Empey said there are typically only three long-stick backhoes readily available in the area — and they were all in use.

The town was able to obtain a backhoe Sunday morning and cleared the jam by the Highway 169 bridge. Clearing the jam, however, let loose a swell of water, which rushed

down creek to the Valley Green jam. Public Works officials called S.M. Hentges & Sons, a local excavation contractor, and asked for assistance in clearing the jam.

“We were very, very concerned we were going to lose Valley Green once again but public works did a great job, S.M. Hentges did a great job,” Empey said.

Together, the town and S.M. Hentges removed about a quarter-mile of ice from the creek and piled it up in Holzer Park, across from Valley Green Park. This cleared a channel for water to flow beyond the mile-long jam and into the wetlands outside the city.

“Once that wetland filled up, the water elevations raised and along with that, a portion of the ice jam raised and it just gave — it slid on top of the other ice jam,” Empey said. “That was enough to let the flow of

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Will suspended from city personnel committee after complaint

BY MICHAEL STRASBURG
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Jordan City Councilman Jeff Will was temporarily removed from the city council personnel committee at the council's March 18 meeting, following a staff complaint and committee investigation.

The action came after the personnel committee issued a recommendation that Will vacate his committee seat for the remainder of 2019 and refrain from one-on-one contact with city employees or contractors during or after business hours.

The personnel committee of the city council is responsible for dealing with employment or work concerns reported by city employees and contractors. Will was appointed to the committee at the beginning of the year.

"We are entitled to have a safe work environment for employees to come in to be comfortable with making such statements," Councilman Terry Stiers said.

The initial complaint was filed by a city employee in early March, according to the city's attorney, Annette Margarit. As legal counsel followed up on the complaint and spoke with city staffers, additional employees indicated they were



FILE PHOTO

The Jordan City Council voted March 18 to temporarily remove Councilman Jeff Will from the city council personnel committee following a staff complaint and committee investigation.

uncomfortable with the way Will spoke to staff at times.

Will was informed of the complaint on March 16. Will said the city's attorney, Brian Wisdorf, assured him he would be informed of the committee's final decision, but said he wasn't told prior to the March 18 meeting.

"That's why I'm shocked that it was on the agenda when I was specifically told I'd be given forewarning of it, whether it was going to be on or not," Will said. "The fact that I don't see it on the agenda, period, unless I'm blind, I

don't understand where that addition came from when it wasn't posted on here when we began."

During the meeting, Wisdorf told Will he was unable to inform him of the committee's recommendation since the body met right before the city council meeting. Councilwoman Amanda Schuh said Will was given an option to resign from the personnel committee in writing prior to the city council meeting.

The personnel committee did not seek a formal response from Will before making its

recommendation, and Margarit later said the priority was to be responsive to the complaint.

Mayor Tanya Velishek indicated the safety of staff was her top priority.

"I will protect city employees and I take it very, very serious if there are complaints in regards to harassment or sexual harassment," Velishek said in an interview. "I believe we need to move quickly."

Will said he was disappointed he was not able to respond to the complaint.

"I think that if anybody

on this council was in that position, they should at least, minimum, be afforded the ability to defend themselves," Will said.

Councilman Robert Whipps said Will should be given the opportunity to meet with members of the personnel committee and the legal team so he can formally respond to the allegations.

"I think that's the very minimum that should have taken place," Whipps said. "It's pretty frustrating for me because I agree — I would want to be given the due pro-

cess of being able to explain myself. To me it feels like a Star Chamber type thing, which is something that happened in Great Britain where a bunch of high up important people would meet and decide whether or not you did something or not and dish out a punishment for it without even talking to you about it."

Councilman Jeremy Goebel agreed Will should have a chance to respond to the complaint.

"I still think that meeting that Robby (Whipps) was talking about should still happen," he said.

Whipps proposed an amendment that would temporarily remove Will from the committee, and prohibit one-on-one contact with city employees or contractors during or after business hours, until Will is given the opportunity to respond to the complaint in front of the personnel committee and legal team.

"I know of no investigation where you don't at least talk to the person who is alleged to have gone under the conduct," Whipps said. "At the very least I think we owe the guy due process."

The amended motion passed 4-1, with Velishek opposed and Will abstaining.

FLOOD

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our actual creek dump into the wetland. As soon as that happened we dropped about three feet in about an hour."

The head of the ice jam held in place until sometime the night of Tuesday, March 19. By the next morning it had dispersed into the wetland, Empey said.

The public works department pumped Valley Green Park March 19, and many evacuated residents began returning that day.

In total, 40 residents stayed overnight at the shelter

March 14, with 14 remaining for the next two days and two people staying March 17, according to Jennifer Pluhar, American Red Cross' Scott County liaison.

Empey said secondary shelter plans were being prepared, which would have relocated evacuees to the SCALE facility near Jordan. At SCALE, Empey said, evacuees would have more privacy in the dormitory-style rooms, rather than the bunk-style shelter at CERC.

Empey reflected on the effectiveness of the emergency response.

"The whole process was very, very smooth quite

honestly. I was very happy with it," Empey said at the meeting. "I didn't expect it to be as smooth as it was. Everybody was great and I think everyone worked together from police, to fire, to public works, the Red Cross, our school district, our bus company — I couldn't be much happier with our initial response."

RECOVERY

Two weeks after the flood there is still plenty of work to be done assessing the damage, repairing property and cleaning homes.

On March 18, the Jordan City Council declared a state

of local emergency. City Administrator Tom Nikunen said the city is working on an estimate of costs to see if the city is eligible to receive aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"We are also assessing any damage to private property for that application," Nikunen said. "We have not completed that yet either."

Scott County has held off on declaring a state of emergency, since the the county needs to reach a threshold of \$245,000 in public infrastructure cost before they're eligible for disaster aid from the state. Disaster aid thresholds at both the state and federal level is

based on county population, according to Scott Haas, director of emergency management and communications.

"If we're a county of 6,000 people it's really easy to get disaster aid," Haas said. "But with us, with our approximately 140,000 (residents), we have to sustain a lot of damage before we're able to get aid."

Haas said the county is looking at two avenues for getting aid. The first is the Minnesota disaster aid program, which offers a 50 percent match after the county reaches its cost threshold. Haas said the state disaster account is unfunded and in

the red, but members of the state Legislature promised to supplement the amount if the threshold is reached.

The other form of potential aid is federal funds. But that would require Minnesota to declare a state of emergency due to expenses associated with the flooding. State expenses would need to reach \$7.9 million before Minnesota would be eligible to receive FEMA funds, Haas said. At that point, the county would need to reach a threshold of \$491,000 to receive federal relief.

"If that happens, we'd be looking at a much bigger pot of money," Haas said.

Nikunen said the city council will reconsider flood mitigation at its next meeting. The issue previously came up in December, when the council heard options for mitigating flooding in low-lying areas of town, which could involve building a levee at a cost of \$6 million to \$9.6 million. At the time, Nikunen thought the council should consider it to appease Jordan residents who complain about having to buy flood insurance.

"I guess I can't say whether the plan would have totally avoided the issues last week as it was a large ice dam not just high flow in the creek," Nikunen said.

On the day of the flood, city staff was scheduled to meet with the DNR to discuss a study on flood migration within the city. Included in the study are various flood mitigation options including ponding, diversions of water and dike building.

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