

PUSHING BACK RAGING RIVER: City of Alton, volunteers erect massive barrier to protect businesses

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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ALTON - Alton Public Works employees and a multitude of volunteers sandbagged and feverishly erected barriers through Monday night and Tuesday attempting to preserve flood -threatened businesses in Downtown Alton.

The Mississippi River levels at Alton are projected to be at 34.7 feet at 6 p.m. today with a crest of 38 feet projected at 12 a.m. on Friday, Jan. 1, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Alton Mayor Brant Walker said the water levels will crest at the third highest level in the city's history. The highest level was in 1993 when the Mississippi River crested at 42.7 feet, or 21.7 feet above flood stage at Alton.

Flooding at Alton is categorized as follows: Minor flooding at 21 feet; moderate flooding at 29 feet and major flooding at anything 34 feet and ab



ove.

Mayor Walker said the city was able to quickly erect a huge barrier wall to protect city businesses within a 24-hour period.

“This wall was built thanks to Bob Barnhart’s leadership, our Public Works Department and hundreds of volunteers,” Walker said. “I can’t thank them enough. We had the fastest rising flood that Alton has ever had. It looks like right now we are holding the flood back. I have never seen construction like this before in our barriers.”

Alton Public Works Director Bob Barnhart stressed that in 1993, it took two months for the water to rise this high and this time with the rapid rainfall, it happened in mere hours.

Barnhart and his staff have worked non-stop through the weekend and today to keep Alton safe and preserve the businesses.

“There is really no way to plan for something like this,” he said. “Starting with Christmas Eve, we had a lot of problems around town because of the massive rainfall. We had mud slides and roads collapsing, then we turned our attention to efforts in Downtown Alton to keep the businesses open.”

Barnhart said with a little more luck the city will be able to push through the flood-related problems.

“We have had a lot of volunteers who have helped us and without them I don’t think we would have been able to make it through this,” he said. “We have had help from Madison County, a lot of local schools, a lot of people just showing up and feeling they need to be part of this to help. We can’t do it without them.”

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Argosy Casino is closed, Walker said, and is prepared to ramp up and open as soon as the water crests and starts to go down. He said from what he understands now, Argosy will try to be open by Jan. 3.

Only Morrison’s is closed at the moment, Walker said, while all the other Alton businesses are pumping and assisting the city in that manner.

The Alton Marina was quickly evacuated and everything there is safe and secure, Walker said.

“It was a very smooth closure of the Marina,” he said. “The staff at the marina are wonderful and did a great job getting it closed.”

Walker said the water in Alton is supposed to crest on Dec. 31 about 5 to 6 feet higher than now.

In the beginning, Alton’s biggest problem was downed trees and there were five mudslides in the city, Barnhart said. Two of the most critical mudslides were on Summit Street and at Piasa Park in Alton. The brick on the side of an area of Summit buckled during the mudslide and it won’t be able to be repaired until the problems with the flood subside, Barnhart said. The area that buckled on Summit was made of all brick materials.



Barnhart said when volunteers and help come like they have in this crisis situation, it makes him proud to be in his position and live in such a great area.

“That is what makes you feel really good about living in a community likes this and makes you want to put up walls to protect our areas and our community downtown and be able to put our support in the community that supports us,” he said.

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Madison County allowed Alton to use its automatic sandbagging machine and that was “phenomenal,” Walker said.

He added that the volunteers and the machine both helped get the sandbags in place with the rapid rise of the flood.

“Without those two machines and the volunteers, there is no way we would be where we are today with the wall,” Walker said. “If this flood holds up, it will be the fourth top 10 flood in our history in two years.”

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