

Flooding 2019: Grafton "Open for Business" in the Face of Floodwaters

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April 8 2019 11:23 AM



GRAFTON – Last week, the Mississippi River at Grafton eked into the bottom tier of major flood stage – but only for a short amount of time.

Signs around the area declared with great pride Grafton was still, in fact, opened for business. Those signs signify the overall spirit of the entire town. Despite high waters

constantly encroaching upon the small city, Grafton businesses often find ways to make it work. The Loading Dock, located right upon the shore, even utilizes a small pedestrian bridge to ensure it can stay opened. After a brief closure, it was open for business last Saturday when reporters from Riverbender.com were in town to survey the receding waters. It looked like a musical party island surrounded by high waters.

Not everyone was able to stay opened through the flooding, however. The Hawg Pit is usually the metaphorical canary in the coal mine when the water starts getting higher. The weekend biker destination was closed when the waters began to rise. Another business, Knotty by Nature, also had to evacuate, and it did so in a true Grafton fashion.

“The town is a resilient town, we pitch in together,” Grafton Mayor Rick Eberlin said last Friday. “Last Sunday morning, Dan Bechtold's Knotty by Nature had his store full of stuff. We had about 30 people show up to help him move out. We have volunteers throughout the town helping local businesses. Brad Hagen at the Oyster Bar organized 10 of his workers to go around town and help businesses move out. That's what's key. That's what makes Grafton Grafton.”

Eberlin said those businesses will have the same help reopening when the waters do recede. He said they are waiting for waters to dip around 27 feet before a lot of the businesses on the Western side of town can reopen. Places like Drifters and Fin Inn will have to wait until then.

And, while Grafton is opened for business, many routes to the town were placed in limbo around the time of the river's crest. The Brussels Ferry is closed, Route 100 – popularly known as the Great River Road – was blocked by oft-ignored barricades, and the intersection of Route 100 and Route 3 smack dab in the heart of Grafton was underwater.

The river crested at just above 29 feet early last week, which is at the fine line between moderate and major flooding. Since then, it has been steadily receding. As of Monday morning, it reached 27.03 feet, which is near the Goldilocks Zone as far as reopening businesses in Grafton is concerned. In the immediate forecast, that number is expected to continue its wane.



But, while Grafton's immediate flood forecast is looking optimistic, the town is not out of the water just yet. In fact, not all of the ice and snow in the Upper Mississippi Valley has melted yet, and the rainiest months of the year are April and June. To complicate that further, the flat topography of the Illinois River, which has its confluence with the Mississippi at Grafton, makes it recede much slower than the Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers.

Eberlin said 18 of the last 35 high water events in Grafton have occurred since 1993. When looking at the records in Grafton, four of the top 10 have occurred in the last 15 years - three of them in the past decade. Eberlin blames this on a variety of reasons – mostly due to federal infrastructure.

“The Army Corps of Engineers isn't dredging out the sediment like they used to,” he said. “Their funding was cut, so they only dredge out certain channels.”

Also to blame, in Eberlin's opinion, is the Sny Levee District about 60-70 miles north of Grafton. He said the construction of those levees caused more flooding in Grafton.

“I've lived in Grafton for four years, been a business owner for eight, and have been coming here for about 20,” Eberlin said. “These floods happen all too often anymore. We've grown accustomed to them, and that's a dirty shame.”

He said he speaks with U.S. Congressional Representative Rodney Davis (R-Taylorville) regarding the excessive flooding situations. He said he wants Davis to push for better infrastructure plans and less federal regulation on Grafton's floodplains. He said there is an infrastructure bill reaching the U.S. Congress now, which would allocate as much as \$7.1 billion for flood prevention along the Mississippi River.



Outside of more dredging, responsible farming (to prevent silt erosion into the water), and less northern levees, Eberlin said Grafton would need something like a flood wall to maintain – something he described as “cost-prohibitive.”

“It would have to start around the Loading Dock and go up toward the Western side of town toward the grocery store up there and the Fin Inn,” Eberlin said. “That's going to be expensive.”

When asked about the effect climate change has on the floods, Eberlin said he was not a subscriber to man-made climate change, saying instead the climate generally works in cycles of about 20 years. He said this past winter's snowfall and the amount of cold and snow up north is indicative of a cyclical climate pattern instead of human-caused climate catastrophe.

He is going against the grain with that thought, however, as climatologists believe climate change will lead to even more historic floods across the world.

Grafton's largest crest occurred in 1993 at 38.17. Its fourth, fifth, sixth and tenth highest crests have occurred within the last 15 years, though. In June 2013, the river reached 30.94 feet. In December 2015, it reached 30.91 in a nearly-unheard-of late December flash flooding event. In June 2008, it reached 30.80 feet. In May 2017, it reached 29.58 feet.

Looking at Grafton's flooding history, it appears the majority of major crests occur in May and June. Meteorologists from the National Weather Service (NWS) in St. Louis confirmed that those are the wettest months in the area, adding additional flooding with higher crests could be possible later in the season.

“If there are any torrential rains on top of the remaining snow and ice, we have a high probability aspect of seeing crests higher than 30 feet,” Eberlin said. “The same thing happened in '93. When you hear talk of the by the experts, it's a bit bothersome. It could come up a foot or two at a time. We would hate to see something like that happen.”

Some of the ghosts of the Great Flood of 1993 still remain in the form of empty lots on the west end of town. Those lots were bought with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds, and are, therefore, unable to be developed. Eberlin said he would like to potentially buy those lots back from the government with interest and try to build higher and make the west end of town thrive economically again. He said that is one of the topics he discusses with Representative Davis.