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## Birdland-area residents urged to leave homes

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The flood of 2008 took a discouraging turn shortly before 11 a.m. Thursday when authorities told residents of Des Moines' Birdland Park area to pack up and get out.

Volunteers and National Guard troops worked frantically into the evening to shore up a leaky levee that protects the area from the raging Des Moines River. They added 2 feet of sandbags, but flood-control forecasters warned that their work could be overwhelmed with water sometime today.

Police called it a voluntary evacuation. People who live in the low-lying area near North High School knew, however, that they were in trouble even before the announcement was made.

"I look for this to wipe my house clear out," said Kevin Risius, who rents a home on Guthrie Avenue.

The river, fortified by a new round of overnight downpours, picked up strength Thursday as it rumbled through the state capital and applied more pressure on the city's battered levees. The frantic effort to stave off damage - there are about 220 homes and two dozen businesses in the affected area - continued despite criticism from a state lawmaker who complained that not enough had been done since floodwaters in 1993 caused millions of dollars in damage in the area.

***Birdland residents "got hit pretty hard last time, and we thought they would get a little bit more attention now," said state Rep. Wayne Ford, a Des Moines Democrat.***

Public Works Director Bill Stowe had been confident all week that the north-side levees would hold, but "changing conditions reduce my confidence," he said Thursday. "I'm very concerned about the Birdland area."

Concern replaced hope up and down the river as flood-control authorities issued increasingly dire reports.

The Des Moines River will surpass its record height at Southeast Sixth Street - 34.3 feet set in 1993 - by 7 a.m. today, the Army Corps of Engineers predicted. The level at Second Avenue is expected to shatter the all-time mark, 31.71 feet, tonight, almost 24 hours earlier than projected earlier in the week.

The only good news came from weather forecasters: No torrential rain on the horizon through the weekend. And from Roger Less of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: "We will contain the river within the levee system."

City officials, meanwhile, bristled at Ford's criticism and pointed to millions of dollars in sewer improvements designed to prevent stormwater backups in the area, as well as manpower and equipment for the emergency levees constructed in the past week.

"I don't understand Ford's comments that we haven't done anything there," said City Councilman Robert Mahaffey, who represents the area. "I don't see any basis for his criticism."

Stowe said that while there is a risk for "either an over-topping or failure of levees" elsewhere in the river basin, Birdland was the focal point of work and worry. Stowe also said there were other areas Thursday, some near Southeast Ninth Street, where levees showed seepage. They were reinforced with sand. At least two three-yard sections of the levee along the Neal Smith trail behind Grubb Community Stadium across from North High School began to sink Thursday afternoon.

"It's falling into the river," city civil engineer Mark Hutchens said.

National Guard troops, city crews and volunteers worked to sandbag a large area from the McHenry Park trailhead at Ninth Street and Oak Park Avenue to Birdland Drive, near where the river takes a sharp turn. The trail is atop a levee that was created after 1993 to shield North High. The stadium was also constructed after the 1993 flood.

Ford, who represents the area, surveyed the situation Thursday and complained that city officials had let down the neighbors. Not enough sandbags, he said. Not enough manpower.

"I've got handicapped people around here who don't know what's going on," he said.

Ford remarked on efforts taken earlier to build a wall around Principal Park south of downtown and said "we should also be able to protect North High School."

Gene Schmitt, a city engineer, said helpers filled and stacked 1,000 to 1,500 sandbags an hour and would "easily fill the 6,000 sandbags delivered." More were to be brought in, but the Corps of Engineers ordered heavy machinery off the levee due to worries that vibrations could weaken the structure.

"I certainly wouldn't bet my life" the sandbags will hold, Stowe conceded. "That's why we're telling people to go."

A 2003 Corps report concluded that nearly \$10 million in flood-control improvements were needed across Des Moines and in the Birdland area and Central Place areas. The Central Place levee was raised 2 feet, but structural defects were later found. Stowe said earlier this week that only a fraction of the needed improvements were made because federal money ran out. Engineers have said it will cost between \$3.5 million and \$5.1 million to raise and strengthen the Birdland levee.

Councilman Tom Vlassis, the only member of the City Council who was in office in 1993, said he thought projects were prioritized based on the extent of possible damage and how quickly the area could recover. He said he did not know why Birdland was not higher on the priority list.

Police Chief Judy Bradshaw said Birdland residents were allowed to stay home in 1993 and there were about eight holdouts. Anyone who stayed behind Thursday "really depletes our resources when we have to be worried about those folks," she said.

A shelter was established at Harding Middle School, 203 E. Euclid Ave., for the Birdland-area refugees.

Bradshaw said residents were notified by automated telephone messages, police officers on foot and fliers left on their doors.

Bradshaw said the notice could be in effect until Monday.

Carol Thompson moved into a new home on Holcomb Avenue three years ago. It was one of four houses between Saylor Road and Second Avenue that was built on land cleared after homes were torn down after the '93 flood.

Thompson evacuated Thursday. But while she had reason to be discouraged - her mother died Wednesday evening - she also had help. Several of her Wellmark Blue Cross/Blue Shield co-workers showed up to lend a hand.

"She's like Mom," said co-worker Kevin Bell, a friend of Thompson's son. "When something's wrong with family, you have to come through."

Meanwhile, more than 100 Pleasant Hill residents were forced from their homes Thursday after water from Four Mile Creek rose quickly on the city's south side.

Evacuation of Pleasant Valley Mobile Home Park began about 3 p.m.; a mandatory evacuation order was issued at 5:30 p.m.

By 4 p.m., water was waist-deep and still rising in some areas of the park at 4333 Park Ridge Ave.

Residents were to be moved to Southeast Polk Junior High School.

Marcella Helmers, 82, said she was sound asleep when the flood- waters began to rise.

"The police pounded on the door, woke me up and said, 'We're here to get you out,' " she said.

"I didn't get to grab anything; I just left."

Lorna Stephenson, who has lived at the park for 34 years, said she was in floods in 1979 and in 1993. During each, only the southwest corner of the mobile home park was threatened, she said.

"But we have levees now, so we thought we were safer," she said

Register reporters Tom Alex and Jared Strong contributed to this report, as did Peggy Nitchal and Adam Wilson of the Altoona Herald-Mitchellville Index.