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Storm Dumps Record Snowfall In Brunswick

BY THE NEWS STAFF

Brunswick County was creeping down an icy road to recovery Tuesday in the wake of a massive winter storm which dumped a record amount of snow over the weekend and gave the area its first "White Christmas" in more than a century.

Coupled with record-breaking cold temperatures and a wind chill factor that left residents feeling as if it were 10 degrees below zero or more, nearly a foot-and-a-half of snow coated and temporarily paralyzed the county over the weekend. Besides forcing many to change holiday plans, the storm left most roads impassable and caused water pipes and pumps across the county to freeze or burst.

The National Weather Service (NWS) measured 15 inches of snow at New Hanover County Airport in Wilmington from the storm that started Friday night and ended late Sunday morning. Local NWS weather watcher Jackson Canady recorded 17 inches of snowfall at his Shallotte Point residence.

Amazingly, the storm did not cause any major power outages in the county. However, the area did set an all-time electricity demand of 154.5 megawatts Christmas Eve day, said Bobby Gore, manager of operations for Brunswick Electric Membership Corp. The previous record peak was 145 megawatts set this summer.

With snow and ice covering most of the roads in the county throughout the weekend, many of those who ignored warnings from local officials and risked traveling were involved in car accidents.

Sgt. J.B. Axson of the N. C. Highway Patrol said Tuesday morning that 125 automobile accidents had been reported in Brunswick and New Hanover counties since Friday night. Most were fender benders, with no major wrecks or serious injuries reported.

Following reports of motorists

stranded on N.C. 211, Brunswick County Emergency Management Coordinator Cecil Logan activated the National Guard unit in Shallotte Sunday morning. About a half dozen Guardsmen were called on to transport hospital employees to and from work and to assist wherever else they were needed. Logan said the National Guard was expected to remain active through Wednesday morning.

While minor road accidents were plentiful, Logan said no house fires had been reported over the long holiday weekend.

While some area residents were reported to be out of heating fuel, the biggest problem across the county besides travel appeared to be frozen or broken water pipes and water pumps.

National Weather Service spokesman Russ Ketterman said the weekend snowfall broke the previous record of 12-1/2 inches set in February 1973 and provided the area with its first "White Christmas" since the service started keeping records in 1871.

Problems caused by the snow were compounded with bitter cold temperatures and life-threatening winds which blew the powdery snow into drifts several feet high.

Ketterman said the Wilmington area set an all-time record low temperature of zero degrees Christmas Day. The old record low was 5 degrees recorded in 1899 and again in 1985. The previous low temperature for Christmas Day was 9 degrees in 1983.

The area also set two new records Saturday with a low temperature of 15 degrees and a high of 20 degrees—the lowest high temperature ever recorded Dec. 23. Ketterman said the 20-degree high was two degrees below the old record low temperature for that date.

Hayden Cartner, a resident of the Tanglewood subdivision near Holden Beach, said Tuesday the Atlantic

Intracoastal Waterway had frozen from one bank to the other near his home. "It was certainly solid all the way across," he said. "I can't find anybody out here who's ever seen it before."

The county's N.C. Department of Transportation maintenance office has kept five salt trucks running since the snow started falling Friday night, said County Maintenance Engineer Lee Currie. The office kept about 20 to 30 people—the equivalent of half its employees—working throughout the weekend and holiday.

The three DOT snow plows in the county were on the roads throughout the weekend and continued to clear roads Tuesday. In addition, Currie said the office rented several graders and borrowed five tandem trucks with salt spreaders and scrapers attached.

Currie, who took over the top DOT post in the county last week just in time for the storm, said Tuesday that all primary roads in the county—including U.S. 74-76, U.S. 17 and N.C. highways 133, 179, 904 and 87—had been cleared at least once.

Plans Tuesday called for crews to concentrate on secondary roads while also trying to clear any remaining snow and ice from the primary routes and keep bridges open. Currie said he planned to work about 15 or 20 employees Tuesday night to take care of slick spots.

"The roads should melt off pretty well today, and we'll be working up to midnight or as late as we can pushing to clear our secondary roads," Currie said Tuesday. "I think they (the crews) did a great job on it. We're not really set up for snow, but we're in pretty fair shape for what we had."

According to the Emergency Management Director Logan, "Considering all the snow we had and the equipment they have, DOT has

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A RECORD SNOWFALL brought a white Christmas to Brunswick County. Here, fencing on dunes at Holden Beach became snow fences. STAFF PHOTO BY EDDIE SWEATT

Developer Organizes Citizens Group To Protest Septic Tank Fees, Taxes

BY RAHN ADAMS

Even with new sewage disposal regulations going into effect Jan. 1, a Shallotte area developer is organizing a citizens group to object to Brunswick County's handling of site evaluations and tax appraisals on lots that are not suitable for septic tank permits.

Hickman's Crossroads resident William Earl Benton told *The Brunswick Beacon* last Thursday that he had mailed a protest letter on behalf of the fledgling group to the Brunswick County Health Department. Friday, Environmental

Health Supervisor John Crowder was not aware of the letter. Health Director Michael Rhodes was out of the office last week.

Benton said he intends to speak to the county Board of Health "just as soon as I can get on their agenda." The board's next regular monthly meeting will be held Jan. 8 in Bolivia. "I'm going to get some response somewhere before I'm done," he said.

In the meantime, the citizens group will meet every Thursday at 7 p.m. at the Alcoholics Anonymous building on U.S. 17 near

Grissetown. "We're not too organized right now," Benton said. "That's what I'm trying to do is get it organized."

Benton said last Thursday that the organization was composed of about 20 members and had met twice, with a third meeting slated that evening. He indicated that other members include both developers and individual property owners who have had difficulty obtaining septic tank permits on lots that have been deemed "unsuitable" or "provisionally suitable" by the health department.

A provisionally suitable lot is one that might qualify for a septic tank permit if improvements are made to the property or if a modified sewage disposal system is used.

"We, as a concerned group of taxpayers of Brunswick County, feel that we are unjustly being taxed on property tax," Benton wrote in the letter dated Dec. 18. "We feel that this needs to be brought to your attention due to the fact that it was regulations by the Health Board that contributed to this condition..."

In the letter, Benton objected to a

six-month-old change in the local site evaluation procedure that made the \$35 evaluation fee non-refundable. Also, he questioned the fairness of allowing only a 50-percent tax reduction for provisionally suitable lots.

"We feel that the \$35 inspection fee would be a fair fee on lots that pass (site evaluations)," Benton wrote, "but we would ask that the Health Department return all fees on lots that did not pass and that the taxpayer not have to make a request by mail and wait a long time to have their money returned."

In March, the health board recommended to county commissioners that site evaluation fees be raised from \$20 to \$35 and that the fees be non-refundable, in order to cover a \$135,000 increase in the health department's local budget.

Health Board Chairman Ricky Parker told commissioners in March, "We, the board, realize money has to come from one of two places—taxes or user fees. We're trying to act responsibly and create some revenue to help with the budget."

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SKETCH BY WILMINGTON POLICE ARTIST

Robber Remains At Large

The Wilmington FBI office last Wednesday released this police sketch of the suspect in a Dec. 15 armed robbery at the Calabash branch of Security Savings and Loan on N.C. 179. Brunswick County Sheriff John C. Davis said Tuesday that no arrest had been made in the case. FBI Agent Paul Cox indicated Friday that several suspects had been identified in connection with the robbery. The FBI could not be reached Tuesday.

Pinkerton, Ludlum Tangle Over Personnel Matters

BY RAHN ADAMS

Brunswick County Commission Chairman Gene Pinkerton learned last week that taking an active role in county administration has some drawbacks—like giving fellow commissioners the impression that the new chairman is making personnel decisions for the entire board.

Pinkerton, who is beginning his second year as District Three commissioner, has been a familiar face at the Brunswick County Government Center at Bolivia since his election as board chairman Dec. 4. He said he has spent much of the time meeting department heads and touring facilities.

"Maybe a little bit of a compromise in being here some, but not being here as much would be better for everybody including myself—which maybe I've learned that, too," Pinkerton told the *Beacon* last Thursday afternoon, shortly after Commissioner Benny Ludlum called an emergency meeting and accused Pinkerton of attempting to fire one department head and hire another one.

Grace Beasley was the only commissioner absent from the 30-minute meeting, which also included a 15-minute executive session requested by county attorney and interim county manager David Clegg to discuss a related "attorney-client" matter. Pinkerton said no action was taken behind closed doors.

An emergency meeting must concern "generally unexpected circumstances" that require "immediate consideration" by a public body, according to the N.C. Institute of Government and the state's Open Meetings Law.

Although no individuals or departments were named in open session, officials indicated that the indirect discussion concerned Purchasing Director Billy Ingram's job status and the search for a new Inspections director. Inspections is the only department without a permanent director.

After the board convened last Thursday at 3:30 p.m., Ludlum initially explained that he requested the emergency meeting because he had heard that Pinkerton "had asked

for the resignation of one of the employees" since the board's regular Dec. 18 meeting.

When Pinkerton flatly denied the accusation, Ludlum asked if the chairman intended to hire a department head. Pinkerton admitted that he had "discussed" hiring a department head, but added that he would get the full board's permission before he ever took any such action.

At a work session last month, Pinkerton tried to have acting Inspections director Julius "Buddy" Lewis named as permanent director. However, after consulting with Clegg, the board chose to advertise the position in-house.

Personnel Officer Debbie Bowling said late Friday that three Inspections staff members applied for the post and that it had not been filled. Ms. Bowling also indicated that no other department heads had resigned or been fired as of Friday.

After the emergency meeting, Pinkerton also admitted that he had engaged in "personal and private" discussions with Ingram that week,

and that the chairman did not "support" Ingram as purchasing director—a position that Pinkerton was instrumental in creating in June and one that Ingram has held only since October.

When asked if his resignation had been requested, Ingram replied, "On the advice of my legal counsel, I've been advised not to comment."

During the meeting, the board defeated a motion by Ludlum that would have delegated all hiring and firing to the commissioners until a permanent county manager is hired. The vote was 1-3, with only Ludlum voting in the affirmative.

Prior to the vote, Commissioner Frankie Rabon spoke out against the motion, saying he felt hiring and firing was Clegg's job as interim manager. Rabon added that he trusted Clegg to make proper personnel decisions, but that he would let Clegg know when he thought a decision was wrong.

Ludlum said he agreed with Rabon's statement but that "if we weren't here today, there would've

been a fellow hired and a fellow fired." Later, he commented, "I still feel like all five commissioners should know what's going on up here. The citizens of Brunswick County deserve better than what they're getting now from county government."

Commissioner Kelly Holden indicated after the meeting that he also felt commissioners were too involved in personnel matters. However, he said he voted against Ludlum's motion because he also feels that Clegg should be allowed to manage on his own.

Pinkerton told the *Beacon* afterwards that he understood criticism about his increased accessibility at the county complex. "I think that it does give us all a certain amount of pressure to have a member of the board here that's involved in policy-making and yet maybe causes people to say or not say things that they would ordinarily say," Pinkerton commented. "I feel some pressure and I'm sure that everybody does. That's not the purpose of it, and yet that's part of it."