

# The Times

The right place. The right Times.

## Damage could rival flood of '55

Thursday, June 29, 2006

BY ANDREW KITCHENMAN

TRENTON -- Bridges closed up and down the Delaware River, residents evacuated on both sides of the river, homeowners who had thought their homes were safe anxiously eyeing rising waters.

It has all happened before.

At one point yesterday, forecasters projected that the river would crest just six inches below the 28.6-foot level reached during the fabled and infamous flood of 1955, although the National Weather Service late last night scaled back that prediction to 25.5 feet at Trenton.

Fifty-one years ago, a house torn from its foundations slammed into the Yardley Bridge, destroying that span. River water seeped into the basement of the State House and reached the intersection of Market and South Broad streets in Trenton. Ninety-nine people died in the Delaware River basin, most of whom were near small creeks in northeastern Pennsylvania that were turned into surging torrents.

The damage totaled \$100 million, not including the lives lost.

It is impossible to predict what the damage will be when this flood is over, experts said, but it is safe to say that it could be extensive. In 1995, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimated that a flood of the scale of the 1955 deluge would cause \$341 million in damage. That estimate would rise to an inflation-adjusted \$453 million today, which is a conservative estimate, according to Ed Vogt, spokesman in the Corps' Philadelphia office.

Vogt noted that the value of real estate has outpaced inflation in the recent years, which could increase the losses.

If it approaches that estimate, it would far outpace the losses in the September 2004 and April 2005 floods, which caused roughly \$30 million and \$100 million in losses respectively.

The 1955 flood and the one this week took different paths to reach the same water levels, although there are some similarities. Then, Hurricane Connie arrived on Aug. 12 and took the area out of a summer drought. It left the ground saturated, so when Hurricane Diane came a week later, all of the water ran off into creeks and then the Delaware.

This time, instead of two hurricanes, there was a week of steady rain followed by heavy downpours from Tuesday night to Wednesday morning.

In the past week, 10 to 15 inches of rain fell in the region in upstate New York, northeastern Pennsylvania and northern New Jersey that feeds into the upper Delaware River. In Trenton, nearly two inches -- or one-third of the total rain this month -- fell the night before last.

While it was sunny much of the day yesterday in Trenton, that made little difference to the Delaware, which was filled with water that fell in Pike County, Pa., and Delaware County, N.Y., earlier in the week.

Whether it was a hurricane in '55 or seemingly harmless storms this past weekend, the effect was like pouring water onto a soaked sponge.

In 1955, the flood heavily affected the Island neighborhood as well as the section of the city around South Warren Street, which had houses and small shops. This year, the Island was affected, but urban renewal has changed the area around South Warren, which has many fewer homes than it once did.

As far as the amount of area affected, the two floods are likely to be similar.

"Obviously, there's going to be changes over 50 years," National Weather Service meteorologist Jim Poirier said. "You're going to see different effects, but they're going to be in a similar ballpark."

This week's storm may become the second in 15 months to exceed the 100-year flood level, while the September 2004 flood was above the 50-year level. Poirier downplayed reading too much into the increasing frequency of floods.

"Storms go in cycles, weather goes in cycles and we're obviously in an active period," Poirier said.

While the forecast for the flood level changed dramatically, the prediction still left the city plenty of time to evacuate the Island and Glen Afton. In 1955, rescue squads had to work with small boats and search lights to evacuate the Island under dangerous and trying conditions.

The 1955 storm brought several bungalow houses from north of Point Pleasant, Pa., downriver. One hit the Yardley Bridge, which was never rebuilt.

While both storms led to many bridge closings, the Delaware River Joint Toll Bridge Commission is keeping a cautious eye on whether any are damaged this year. The Washington Crossing Bridge was damaged in the April 2005 storm, but it has been repaired since then. It was closed yesterday.

[The comparison between the two floods have been on the mind of Mary A. Shafer, author of "Devastation on the Delaware: Stories and Images of The Deadly Flood of 1955," printed in 2004. Shafer knew the area was facing a real threat when she saw the river rise next to her hometown, Nockamixon Township in upper Bucks County, Pa., but she said the conditions are different this year.](#)

["The problem with '55 was that we had two straight hurricanes," she said.](#)

That major floods continue to cause millions of dollars in damages raises the issue of what can be done to limit the risk in the future.

State officials are looking at what can be done to lessen future losses. Former Gov. Richard J. Codey formed a task force after the April 2005 flood that has issued a draft report on recommended changes, but the final report hasn't been approved yet. The draft report includes recommendations to more strictly regulate building in flood plains and calls for more planning to reduce the risk from floods.

*nj.com/The Times • Contact Andrew Kitchenman at [akitchenman@njtimes.com](mailto:akitchenman@njtimes.com) or (609) 989-5706.*