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Officials flood into region

Rendell, Santorum fly in. Tour comes as most roads, bridges reopen.

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Signs of normalcy -- spiked with oddities -- returned on Saturday to riverside areas of Easton, while Gov. Ed Rendell visited and pledged to request more help for residents and business owners.

Rendell flew over flood-ravaged communities, stopping in Wilson Borough to meet with local officials.

Something has to be done, Rendell said. But he shook his head and appeared flabbergasted at what the solution could be.

The governor suggested levees, dredging or the removal of structures along the Delaware River are all extreme but tenable possibilities for Easton's future. Levees had cost \$200 million to build in Wilkes-Barre and have prevented \$1.5 billion in damages, Rendell said.

"Whether levees or dikes are things people along the Delaware would like to see, well, we'll just have to see," Rendell said.

One question no one could answer: How could three major floods afflict the region within just two years?

"I don't have a clue," Rendell said. "We always hear about the 100-year flood plain. Well clearly, there's no 100-year flood plain anymore."

U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., who traveled with Rendell, said the Senate this week approved \$175,000 to study the problem. That study, focusing on the Delaware River basin, could take two years, he said.

U.S. Rep. Charlie Dent, R-Lehigh Valley, added that he's pursuing another \$150,000 to examine the Bushkill, Saucon and Spring creeks that feed into rivers.

Cars returned Saturday to reopened Larry Holmes Drive and Route 611, kicking up layers of dirt coating the roads. People occasionally strolled along mud-caked sidewalks, but mostly to survey damage and the still-raging Delaware River.

A truck outfitted with a snow plow -- unheard of during the summer -- reappeared on the first day of July to shove away mud in a lot behind the Governor Wolf building.

Riverside Park remained in shambles. The amphitheater, covered with inches of mud, resembled the result of an archeological dig. A roof sat on bleachers and two sinks with their tubing were tangled around a large sinktop leaning against a wall.

City parks Director Carl Schumacher said employees were regaining their breath this weekend and would return in full force on Monday. In the meantime, they began draining the small pool at Eddyside Park, which Schumacher said could be open in a week to 10 days.

"It's gonna be a couple weeks to get things back to normal I guess," Schumacher said. "It's a day to day (process); the guys are tired they've really been working hard."

Schumacher said he and employees are keeping daily logs and taking pictures of what's being cleaned up, who's doing it and the amount of time devoted. That will be proof for FEMA officials, expected to arrive in the city this week to examine damage.

President Bush's declaration of a disaster Friday in Northampton County allowed FEMA to provide emergency funding to local and state officials. But Rendell and other politicians said Saturday they're still urging Bush to open more emergency funding for individual residents and businesses.

The governor said Saturday's flyover would provide visual proof of destruction to fuel his request for aid.

A federal Flood Mitigation Assistance program exists, allowing the government to sometimes purchase property from plagued property owners, often for use as parks. But the owners must be flood-insured.

Rendell said 75 percent of the program's money comes from the federal government and 25 percent from the state.

"That's something we have to do more of," Rendell said.

Red Cross spokeswoman Janice Osborne said 12 people remained in a lone shelter Saturday at Easton Area High School. By then, the agency had handed out 206 meals, used 50 volunteers and was continuing to distribute clean-up kits as roads reopened.

Kits included cleaning supplies and were accompanied with water bottles.

"It's so gosh darn hot out here, and people are trying to mop up," Osborne said.

She said supplies would flow and shelters would operate through at least Independence Day.

People will be cleaning up way beyond then. About a dozen AllRisk damage control employees were working at the McDonald's on Third Street Saturday.

A McDonald's source -- who said he couldn't identify himself because he wasn't allowed to speak to media -- said the Third Street restaurant would reopen. The restaurant was socked hard by all three recent floods.

"Did you ever play sports?" the source asked. "Did you ever get hit in the (groin) and you feel it up into your neck? That's what it's like."

Certainly, quite a few people share his pain -- and the hope that a fourth consecutive calamity isn't a sure thing.

But officials say it's apparent something has changed to cause the disasters.

"This problem is, unfortunately, probably here to stay," Rendell said.

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