

Keeping a close eye on the weather

Rising rivers present a danger to children, pets

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WATERLOO REGION

A mid-winter thaw has river-watchers keeping a close eye on local waterways.

But there are just too many unknowns for officials to predict whether flood-prone communities like New Hamburg and Ayr will be bailing out in the coming days.

"This still has a long way to go," said Dave Schultz of the Grand River Conservation Authority.

How mild will it actually get, and for how long? How much rain will fall, and how quickly? Will ice conditions in the rivers change suddenly, with little or no warning?

Once some morning fog lifts, today's high is expected to climb to 8 C with periods of rain and winds gusting as high as 70 km/h by evening.

The expected high is a bit cooler than the 11 C originally forecast by Environment Canada.

Water levels were just beginning to creep higher yesterday afternoon as warmer air settled in.

"We do expect the flows to continue rising overnight but not to the warning levels in any of the communities," Schultz said.

But even though warnings hadn't been issued as of last night, people who live in local flood plains shouldn't let their guard down. Conditions can quickly worsen, especially if ice jams form. Conservation authority staff were closely watching the Grand River near West Montrose and the Nith River between New Hamburg and Plattsville.

"Everybody is scared," said Wilmot Township fire chief John Ritz. "We've had a number of floods in the past year. We've been monitoring the situation for over a week now. Beyond that there isn't much we can do."

An advisory issued Monday morning said residents in low-lying areas should move items to higher ground. People and pets should also stay well clear of slippery banks and thin ice throughout the watershed.

A new pamphlet on flood preparation for residents of New Hamburg is being mailed out. It's also available at www.grandriver.ca.

The brochure outlines the warning system for the town and provides a list of tips on what people can do before, during and after a flood. Officials have also scheduled an open house for Feb. 19 at the New Hamburg Community Centre from 4 to 8 p.m. Representatives from the GRCA, Wilmot Township, Waterloo Regional Police, Union Gas and Kitchener-Wilmot Hydro will be on hand.

The temperature will remain above the freezing mark tomorrow at 2 C with flurries or rain. Cooler temperatures are forecast to return for the weekend, with highs of -2 and -1 C expected Friday and Saturday under sunny skies.

Before the warm front moved in, freezing rain left a slick coat of ice on area roads yesterday morning. By 8:30 a.m., Waterloo Regional Police had been called to 24 crashes across the region. Most were fender benders.

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