

2 Killed by disastrous flood that ravaged historic Maryland town

BY NICK DIMARCO, SINCLAIR BROADCAST GROUP SUNDAY, JULY 31ST 2016

ELLCOTT CITY, Md. (Sinclair Broadcast Group) — Two people have been found dead while one other man is missing the morning after a flash flood caused widespread damage to Historic Ellicott City, a popular main street town in Maryland's Howard County.

The victims were identified as Jessica Watsula, 35, and Joseph Anthony Blevins, 38.

“We’ve never seen such devastation,” Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman said. “It looks like a war zone.”

According to Baltimore County police:

Watsula's body was found at about 2:20 a.m. [Sunday]. Her brother told police that she and family members were visiting Ellicott City when the flash flood occurred. They were inside the victim's vehicle, attempting to leave, when the vehicle was swept away. The occupants got out of the vehicle, and all but the victim were rescued and transported to Howard County General Hospital. The victim was swept away and eventually found about 200 yards from the Ilchester Bridge.

Blevins' body was discovered at about 8:30 a.m. [Sunday] when a man walking a trail found the body washed up on shore near Ilchester Road and the Howard County line. Police learned that Blevins was in Ellicott City with his girlfriend. The vehicle was swept away with the couple inside. The woman got out of the vehicle and was rescued, but Blevins was swept away.

About 6 inches of fast-falling rain forced 120 water rescues, destroyed 170 cars and four or five buildings Saturday evening, Howard County officials said. All residents of the 200 year old strip have been asked to temporarily vacate their homes and businesses as cleanup from the storm continues. At least 20 buildings suffered "significant damage" with damage estimates in the millions of the dollars, according to Bob Francis, the director of the county's Department of Inspections, Licenses, and Permits.

Officials could not even begin to provide an estimated timeline for when they would be able to return.

“We are coming together as a community. We’re going to continue working together,” Howard County Councilman Calvin Ball said. “We are stronger than the storm and we will be rebuilding even better and stronger.” “I will never forget seeing that video,” Kittleman said. “That tells me that this isn’t going to defeat us.”

Kittleman said the county would begin accepting donations through the Red Cross beginning Monday. The Ellicott City Partnership also established a website to accept donations to help the ravaged businesses.

In total, 80 people had to be rescued from cars and at least 40 from the Phoenix Emporium, a bar which sits at the low-lying bottom of the town near a bridge over the Patapsco River.

Officials said 5.9 inches of water fell between 7 and 9 p.m. which caused a lot of significant structural damage, exposing utilities and washing away sidewalks.

Main Street was closed and a state of emergency was ordered by Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan. Maryland State Police and Howard County police pledged to provide 24/7 security for the area.

Johnny Breidenbach, the owner and chef of Johnny's Bistro on Main, said he closed his restaurant around 7:30 Saturday night, before the worst of the flooding, and he hadn't been able to get back there to assess the damage.

"They told me that the door was totally ripped away from the hinges, and I don't know how much water I have inside," Breidenbach told The AP by phone.

He said Ellicott City would recover eventually, but some business owners may not be able to wait long enough to reopen.

"I could be one of those people," he said.

Jason Elliott, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Sterling, Virginia, said the town was hit by a series of strong thunderstorms that dumped heavy rain over a 2-hour period. Other areas nearby received heavy rainfall for only about 30 to 45 minutes, he said.

"It's just a matter of the heavy rain being that long in duration. It just happened to set up over that area," Elliott said.

With so much rainfall, there was nowhere for it to go other than the street.

"Everything funneled toward that Main Street area. There's hills on both sides, the river's on the third side," Elliott said. "In this case the Patapsco River was coming up, too. We believe there's some contributions to the flood from both directions."

Ellicott City was established in 1772 as a mill town along the Patapsco, and many 18th and 19th-Century buildings were still intact before Saturday's floods. Once a home to mill workers, in recent decades it has become known for restaurants, art galleries, antique shops and nightlife. Main Street slopes dramatically toward the river and has long been susceptible to flooding.

The county courthouse and government headquarters are located in Ellicott City but are on higher ground.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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