

'You've just got to hunker down and fight your way through it'

2007 storm tested Seaside's public works employees

By R.J. MARX
Seaside Signal

Neal Wallace was the public works director for Seaside in 2007, and it fell to he and his team to respond to the cleanup left in the aftermath of the Great Coastal Gale.

"I feel like we are always prepared for something," Wallace said. "It's part of what we do."



Neal Wallace

It was Sunday evening, Dec. 2, 2007, and "it was blowing up pretty good outside." A light sleeper, at 6 a.m. there was a knock on the door.

It wasn't until he saw a big billboard tossed onto the highway that he realized the scale of the storm.

"We get big winds, but those winds just kept up," he said. "It was howling for 24 hours."

Among his first actions was to gather crews and help respond to public safety concerns.

Despite three days of high winds, Wallace and crew battled the outdoor elements. "Monday they were really bad," he said. "You just do. It's just one of those things. You've just got to hunker down and fight your way through it."

STORM FACTS:

Daytime temperatures were fairly comfortable in the mid-50s.

The community pulled together to help each other out, from individual residents to the fire department and

Pacific Power, which brought crews from throughout the West.

The Bob Chisholm Community Center turned into a shelter for hundreds of residents, under the direction of Mary Blake, then executive director of the Sunset



A business sustained damage in high winds.



North Coast residents gather at the Bob Chisholm Senior and Community Center in Seaside for warm food, kids games and movies during the storm.

Empire Park and Recreation Department.

While the building didn't have a backup power source at the time, Wallace and his crew helped hook up a 60-kilowatt generator so they could run the kitchen

and run lights.

The emergency operations center, using walkie-talkies, allowed the city to coordinate cleanup operations.

"Down at the south 'Y,' off on the east



PAM ROBEL

Pacific Northwest Natural Foods and adjoining shops in Gearhart suffered from roof and water damage.

side of the highway, was a big empty lot that had been graded off," Wallace said. "We got permission to bring debris there, which was very handy."

A hauling crew brought grinders in and hauled the material away. Western Oregon Waste added to the recycling effort.

Wallace sees the city's 2007 response as indicative of what might happen when future disasters strike.

"Wherever there is a problem, people figure out a solution," Wallace said.

While storms will always hit, moving power lines underground makes a big difference, he said. The city is working on that now — all new development requires underground power, and busier areas are targeted — access areas, the beach, Avenue A, 12th Avenue and Holladay Drive. "Hopefully they'll do that on South Holladay Drive," he added.

Unfortunately, for many streets, if wires are already overhead, "it gets wickedly expensive," he said.

Any special commendations during the storm?

"I think everybody overall," Wallace said. "I think it is hard to single out people, because so many people just did what they could to make it happen in so many different areas."

"Whether it is a storm or you've got a main break, that's when the public works guys kind of shine," he continued. "When they respond to fix some things, that's when they look the best."

South County had its own problems

By PAMELA ROBEL
For The Daily Astorian

When the weather report came in, I decided the easiest thing to get for myself in the event that I was out of power for a little while would be easy "cheese" — you know, the stuff that comes in a can and doesn't have to be refrigerated — and a loaf of bread for cheese sandwiches.

I bought my first camping lantern, brought my sleeping bag in from my car, plugged in my laptop, and taped my windows because I'd never been in a storm like was predicted.

I remember the lights flickering out, and the wind making my apartment sway enough that I felt seasick. Waking up in the morning and heading to the Seaside Signal office, the first thing I remember seeing that suggested it was a doozy of a storm was the huge pine in front of the office uprooted in the parking lot.

As more light came, more dam-

age showed. Stops at city hall, the police and fire departments confirmed there was no power and that an emergency shelter was being set up. From there on out, the shelter was my first stop every morning. The radio was the other vital part of the information train. Everywhere I went had a radio on so that updates could be heard quickly; the hum of the radios became an almost constant background noise.

What struck me most was the sense of community throughout the whole immediate aftermath and the longer cleanup. Having moved to Seaside to work, getting through the storm with everyone else made me a local, not a tourist. Maybe because we all went through things together, maybe because when I wasn't working I went to the shelter to help make meals.

Coverage and reporting was tricky. You couldn't make phone calls or send emails. As I remember it, U.S. Highway 101 was closed for a few days, so I was standing on the beach sending my reports to The Daily Astorian via

text message, taking my own humble photos, and doing a lot of literal footwork for every story before returning to my dark, cold apartment to wash my hair in cold water in my bathroom sink and snuggle into my sleeping bag at curfew each night.

On day three or four, when 101 was reopened, I drove my story notes to the Astoria office, typing on the shared computer and grateful for the warmth of the office. Whether it was a story about chopping tree debris or flipping pancakes, every story seemed critically important through that time.

When the power came back on in Astoria, I'd never been more thankful for the offer to stay in a hotel. I'll always be thankful for the paper putting me up for two nights. Having access to heat and hot water felt unbelievably luxurious after a week in the dark and cold!

Pamela Robel is a writer based in Moses Lake, Washington. She was The Daily Astorian's Seaside-based South County reporter in 2007.

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