

What Now? Cottage Grove area emerges from once-in-a-century snowstorm

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DAMIEN SHERWOOD/COTTAGE GROVE SENTINEL

A deep layer of snow covers Bohemia Park, hiding park attractions such as the walking trails, fountain and amphitheater under a blanket of white.

Snowfall in the Willamette Valley is often greeted with a certain affection. Children may get to skip some school days, families bond while creating snowmen and winter sports enthusiasts rub their hands together at a chance to make their mark on fresh slopes.

The evening of Feb. 24 likely sparked such sentiments as weather forecasts made good on their promise and the first snowflakes lazily floated to the valley's floor. To the surprise of many, however, the snowflakes didn't stop. And soon they weren't falling so lazily.

By 8 p.m. that night, the first reports of power outages had begun to surface in Cottage Grove and the snow had risen to eight inches in some areas. Through the night, the storm battered the valley and, by Monday morning, the National Weather Service reported 14 inches had fallen in Cottage Grove while residents in outlying areas posted through social media snowfall closer to two feet or more.

Sporadic snowfall followed as people tried to dig their way out, but many became stuck on the slushy roads.

Finally, late afternoon Wednesday, the first sun rays began peeking through overcast gray into a snow-caked Willamette Valley. Though the clouds parted, darkness had fully set inside thousands of electricity-deprived homes in and around Cottage Grove. Many roads were still impassable, blockaded by fallen trees and barriers of snow. Fuel stations and grocery stores were understaffed and overwhelmed by throngs of customers stocking up for a wait that many expected to be long, dark and cold.

A State of Emergency

The situation was nothing short of a crisis and states of emergency were

declared for both Cottage Grove and Lane County Tuesday, Feb. 26. Before long, Gov. Kate Brown issued an emergency declaration for 10 Oregon counties, including Lane, last Thursday.

The governor's declaration provided access to additional resources and the potential for federal highway system funds in the future while directing Oregon's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) to coordinate responses with the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), Oregon State Police and the Oregon National Guard to ensure cities and small communities received support as needed.

With a Lane County state of

emergency declared, local spending limits were lifted and the need to go through the County Board of Commissioners for approval was removed, expediting the response process and allowing the county and its local partners to request additional state support from OEM and other partners if needed.

"It frees up resources that wouldn't otherwise be available to us," said Lane County Commissioner Heather Buch. "Getting those additional resources is critical because people are not as available to help when they're stuck in their own locations. We have several other folks from different counties in our office helping with us."

Lane County's own OEM staff of five swelled to about 15 or 20, Buch said.

The accelerated access to funding is also expected to come with possible reimbursement.

"When smaller cities are expending large amounts of money to get services out to their communities to put things back together, that's very expensive and our small cities have a really hard time being able to afford those kinds of services," said Buch.

The county can now document those expenses and later request some reimbursement of those funds from FEMA and state sources.

Distributed resources around the county included fuel, food, water,

medicine, baby formula and American Red Cross assets.

"Just those critical essentials that everyone needs to get by," said Buch. "Stability for me means they have electricity and all their basic needs met. Not everybody has that yet."

As for Cottage Grove, the declaration didn't entitle the city to any aid — distribution is at the discretion of the county or state — though it does open the door for the city to tap into any of the aforementioned resources.

"The emergency declaration can also be very valuable if FEMA steps in," said Public Works and Development Director Faye Stewart said.

Years ago, an ice storm qualified Lane County for emergency aid funding. "I think we got close to 80 percent of our expenses from that storm reimbursed," Stewart said.

All clean up and spending must be done during the window that the state of emergency is declared and reimbursements in the form of state or federal funding may come later, though it is not clear how much can be reimbursed.

"So, it was best for us to take the action and be in position to be able to take advantage if it happens," said Stewart.


The city's state of emergency is expected to last at least a month or two as extensive coordination efforts are needed to respond to damage caused by the storm.

"We will probably keep this declaration of emergency active for awhile because there's lots of clean-up that needs to be done," said City Manager Richard Meyers.

Cottage Grove and its surrounding communities still need plenty of attention. Though power has largely been restored to the city proper, downed trees and debris litter public and private property. And many roads, if cleared, are bookended by large snow banks.

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