

Blizzrd blankets county in up to two feet of snow

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Terrell Boettcher

Lavinia Williams, the custodian for First Congregational Church in Hayward, blows snow off the sidewalk on Fourth Street during the big storm that hit the area on Monday.

Mother Nature demonstrated her power and fickleness as a weekend of unseasonably high temperatures was eclipsed by a March blizzard causing the closing of highways, schools and a number of businesses in Sawyer County and the surrounding area.

As unofficial reports ranging from a dozen inches to nearly two feet of snow roll-in residents dig out from a storm which caught many by surprise.

The first inkling of things to come was the announcement of a two-hour delay, followed by an outright canceling of schools in the Hayward Community School District. As the storm intensified and conditions deteriorated further highway maintenance crews were pulled in both Sawyer and Washburn counties. The Sawyer County Sheriff's office advised limiting travel to emergency situations only. By 10:15 a.m. the Winter Storm Warning had been extended into the evening and accumulations of an additional 5-9 inches of snow were forecast.

"Things are just virtually shutting down now, they have no choice" said WHSM announcer Hans Evans as he advised listeners to wait until the storm passed before attempting travel on area roads. By 10:30 a.m. the Wisconsin State Patrol announced that county plows were being pulled from roadways "due to severe weather conditions and limited visibility."

At just before 11 a.m. the closing of all roads in Sawyer County was announced on area radio stations. Lieutenant Kurt Barthel explained that the declaration that roads had been deemed impassable was made by the county highway commissioner working in cooperation with the sheriff's office. When roads are declared impassable, law enforcement officers may legally issue tickets to motorists and escort the driver home. Barthel said the announcement was made to clear roadways so that vehicles were not on the roadways when county maintenance crews once again began plowing.

Highway Commissioner Gary Gedart said they determined around 9:15 a.m. that roads were

becoming impassable based upon reports from plow drivers of zero visibility. Crews were told at that time to return to the Highway Shops if possible. Gedart said according to the Department of Transportation roads are defined as passable when they are free from snow, drifts and snow ridges and can be traveled at a reasonable speed. The county's highways were deemed impassable for an extended time on Monday

Highway maintenance crews were back into service on the roads around 11 a.m. Even at that time plow drivers reported difficulty. "With the wet heavy snow trucks were having a hard time pushing snow." Gedart said that was especially true on hills. Plows were also reported stuck in deep snow on Highways S and 77. Although announcers were stating that crews were back out on area highways motorists were advised to refrain from using roadways to allow the trucks to plow unimpeded by traffic. Many who had failed to heed early warnings were stuck in and on roadways resulting in a busy day for area towing companies and extra work for those attempting to clear the roadways for travel.

As of 3:30 p.m. roads were reported snow covered. Area radio stations were advising that only emergency equipment should be on the roadways. By 4 p.m. they were reporting the extension of the Storm Warning until 10 p.m. Motorists were advised to stay off the roads all night due to snowfall with possible white-out conditions.

By 5 p.m. Gedart said every state and county highway had received at least one pass, but snow was still forecast into the evening. "It was a challenge," he said. "They (plow drivers) are going on 12 hours without a break — fatigue will be setting in."

Tuesday morning schools in the district were closed again because many side roads and driveways were not yet plowed out. The two-day break marked the first time in recent memory that the schools had been closed for more than a day due to a snow emergency.

Gedart said Tuesday that unofficial reports were coming in around the county of snowfall totals ranging from 13 inches in the Hayward area to 22-24 inches further to the east.

Highway Department crews continued to plow until 8 p.m. on Monday night. Plows were back out at 4:30 a.m. but Gedart said several highways were still considered ice packed due to traffic on the roads the previous day. "It didn't help that we had to pull the trucks for a while on Monday."

As county and town crews continued to work Tuesday to return roads to passable conditions Gedart extended his appreciation to the residents who heeded the notices to refrain from traveling. "It helped us considerably."

No emergency rescues were reported in Sawyer County during Monday's storm, but many cars were reported in ditches or stranded in the middle of roadways due to the rapidly-falling heavy, wet snow. Wreckers were in constant motion towing cars out of ditches.

"People pretty much stayed home," said Brian Cody, Sawyer County Emergency Government and Ambulance Service director. He said he measured 19 inches of snow in his driveway in Couderay, and a neighbor measured 24 inches. Along Highway 27, snow depths were "all over the map," he added. Strong winds produced large drifts.

Southern Sawyer County had snow depths of 20 to 24 inches, Cody added. "People had a hard time

moving it.”

A couple small power outages occurred in the North Central Power Company service area. In Couderay, power was out for about an hour starting at 11 a.m. and Exeland had another outage for a short time in the afternoon. Some Stone Lake area residents reported outages of up to two hours also beginning around 11 a.m.

“Road crews are doing a great job out there,” Cody added.

The city Finance Committee meeting and council meetings postponed Monday were rescheduled to 4:45 and 5 p.m., respectively on Thursday, March 16.

Editor’s note: Terrell Boettcher also contributed to this story.