

City's cleanup from snow chaos expected to take days

BY CLARA HO, ANNALISE KLINGBEIL AND ERIKA STARK, CALGARY HERALD **SEPTEMBER 11, 2014 6:09**

The city estimates it will take days to clean up fallen trees that brought down power lines, blocked roads, and led to widespread power outages across the city, after a summer snowstorm walloped Calgary this week.

"This is a very, very big job," said Mayor Naheed Nenshi Wednesday afternoon. "Cleanup from this will take an amount of time measured in days, if not weeks."

Ken Uzeloc, director of the Calgary Emergency Management Agency, said debris cleanup will be dealt with in a "staged fashion."

"Priority wise, we're cutting the trees, we're getting them off the road, and we'll go back and deal with the cleanups after," Uzeloc told reporters Wednesday at the emergency operations centre, which was activated Tuesday following a flood of weather calls.

For a third day in a row, Calgarians dealt with flurries as a volatile weather system moved across the province, bringing between 20 and 35 centimetres of snow, according to Environment Canada.

Trees still flush with green leaves bowed and sagged from the weight of the sticky snow, some of them snapping and burying vehicles parked below or landing on power lines, leaving people across the city in the dark.

"If we'd gotten this snow once the trees were off the leaves, we wouldn't be having this situation," Uzeloc said. "The timeliness of the early snowfall has probably been the biggest impact."

Branches and leaves littered city sidewalks, pathways, bike paths, parking lots and roadways. Some intersections, including Sifton Boulevard at Elbow Drive, were closed completely after being blocked by a fallen tree. Transit routes were briefly diverted.

Uzeloc said the fire department received more than 1,800 calls between noon Tuesday and noon on Wednesday — 10 times the regular call volume, adding most of the calls came from the west side of the city.

Fortunately, there have been no serious injuries or fatalities, he added. Call volumes to EMS increased, but weren't out of the ordinary, said EMS spokesman Adam Loria.

In Bowness, residents used rakes and brooms to clean up branches on streets where thank-you signs from last summer's flood were still visible and they expressed concern about the already eroded river bank being further damaged when all the snow melts.

"We're a little tired of cleaning up," said Kelly O'Gorman-Dixon, whose Bowness home was destroyed by the flood.

O'Gorman-Dixon said when crews demolished her house after the flood, they acted like "surgeons," taking great care to make sure the aging trees on her lot were not damaged.

As she surveyed how much her towering trees were walloped by the storm, she lamented mother nature's most recent destruction.

"Calgary just doesn't get a break."

Nearby, Garry Grant helped neighbours cut broken branches with what he dubbed a "tree-cutter pole" — a saw attached to a long pole.

"The trees are in shock. They don't know what's going on. I'll be surprised if they survive this," Grant said.

Enmax spokeswoman Doris Kaufmann Woodcock said at one point about 30,000 customers were in the dark, some of them for upwards of 12 hours.

The power in Terry Lendey's northwest home went out around 4 a.m. Wednesday and by 2:30 p.m., she was still in the dark.

"It's amazing how quickly a house cools down without power," she said.

Schools in both the public and Catholic system also experienced outages, although they were all able to remain open Wednesday. Sixty CBE facilities were without power for at least part of the day.

Power had been restored to most Catholic schools by the evening, with officials planning to decide at 7 a.m. Thursday whether they will open the few schools still affected by outages.

Dozens of traffic signals were on the fritz, turning large intersections into four-way stops and bringing traffic — in some places — to a crawl.

The weather forced the closure of several city pools, arenas and parks, as well as the Calgary Zoo. Beakerhead, an annual arts, engineering and science event, cancelled all outdoor activities Tuesday, and Spruce Meadows moved its Masters opening-day competitions to Thursday.

Meanwhile, crops across southern Alberta were flattened under the weight of heavy snow. Farmers are worried that the moisture will affect the quality of the crops.

Citizens are reminded to call 911 in cases where public safety is at risk, including trees knocking down power lines, trees falling onto homes, or trees landing on vehicles and trapping occupants inside. Only those with the proper equipment and training should attempt to clear debris, Uzeloc said.

He added the city is equipped to deal with the sudden summer snow. City crews worked overnight to deal with response and cleanup, he said.

“This is something we deal with all the time. It just came about six weeks earlier than we normally get it.”

The snowy weather is not expected to last much longer, with double-digit highs expected for the next few days, and temperatures back into the 20s by Monday.