

N.Y. / REGION

Recovery Is Slower in New York Suburbs

By SAM DOLNICK AUG. 28, 2011

Tropical Storm Irene swept through the desolate streets of New York on Sunday, flooding low-lying areas and leaving millions of homes without power along the Eastern Seaboard as it continued on to New England. Most New Yorkers emerged from their makeshift bunkers to find little of the widespread devastation the authorities had feared.

But the aftermath of the storm, at least in New York and its suburbs, could be most felt on Monday in the early-morning commute -- which, for some people, was a nonstarter.

Although most of the city subway's 22 lines were running by 6 a.m. on Monday, the experience could not be more different outside the city, where fallen trees and downed wires caused problems throughout suburban New York and Connecticut. There was no service whatsoever on the Metro-North Railroad, and no commuter service into New York on New Jersey Transit. The Long Island Rail Road had extremely limited train service; Amtrak was not running any trains between Boston and Philadelphia, and service between New York and Albany was also stopped.

PATH trains did resume on Monday; New Jersey Transit buses also were

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getting to New York meant doing something out of their normal routine: taking ferries, commuter vans or finding instant car pool partners.

The storm, which was downgraded from a hurricane shortly before it hit New York, attacked in a flurry of punches. A police station in Cranford, N.J., flooded and had to be evacuated. Firefighters paddling in boats rescued more than 60 people from five-foot floodwaters on Staten Island. New York's major airports were closed, and at least five storm-related deaths were reported in New York State and New Jersey.

But after wide-ranging precautionary measures by city officials that included shutting down New York's mass-transit network, sandbagging storefronts on Fifth Avenue and issuing evacuation orders for 370,000 people across the city, Hurricane Irene is likely to be remembered by New Yorkers more for what did not happen than for what did.

Windows in skyscrapers did not shatter. Subway tunnels did not flood. Power was not shut off pre-emptively. The water grid did not burst. There were no reported fatalities in the five boroughs. And the rivers flanking Manhattan did not overrun their banks.

Still, when the center of the storm arrived over New York City, about 9 a.m., winds had reached 65 miles per hour, making Irene the largest storm to hit the city in more than 25 years, even as the bulk of the storm's power was reserved for the suburbs.

"All in all, we are in pretty good shape because of the exhaustive steps I think we took to prepare for whatever came our way," Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said at a news conference on Sunday afternoon.

Before striking New York, the storm left a path of wreckage that killed at least 16 people in six states, paralyzed most modes of transportation across the Northeast and caused flooding in several states.

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banks.”

New York’s economic costs have yet to be calculated, but with Broadway dark, storefronts covered in plywood and virtually the entire population shuttered indoors, the weekend’s lost sales and storm damage could end up costing the city about \$6 billion, said Peter Morici, a business school professor at the University of Maryland. The total national cost could reach \$40 billion, Mr. Morici added.

Outside New York City, the storm’s wrath was stark. In New Jersey, more than 800,000 customers were without power on Sunday, and the state’s largest utility, Public Service Electric and Gas, estimated it could take a week to restore electricity to all of its customers. In Connecticut, 670,000 customers had lost power — roughly half the state — which surpassed power failures caused by Hurricane Gloria in 1985.

Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey said more than 300 roadways were blocked, but he warned that dire problems were still to come, particularly along the Delaware, Ramapo and Passaic Rivers. “The real issue that we are going to have to deal with now is flooding,” Mr. Christie said.

Flooding in Philadelphia reached levels that had not been seen in that city in more than 140 years. Vermont was also struck particularly hard; even as the worst of the winds had dissipated, flooding forced officials to evacuate parts of southern Vermont, and floods were expected in the northern portion of the state as late as Monday.

In New York, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said it could take a week to fully restore power to the 750,000 customers without electricity. That included 457,000 on Long Island, 50,000 in Westchester County and 34,000 in Queens, officials said. Consolidated Edison said power was not cut in Manhattan.

Mr. Obama said that though the storm had not proved as strong as many feared, the aftermath would be substantial. “The impacts of this storm will be felt for some time,” he said Sunday from the White House. “And the recovery effort will last for weeks or longer. I want people to understand that this is not over.”

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But despite the lack of power, flooding and foiled weekend plans, the soggy Northeast's collective mood shifted Sunday from dread to relief.

In New York, joggers, not floodwaters, were spotted along the East River. Restaurants, bookstores and bars reopened. Traffic picked up, and officials at the United States Open announced that the tournament would begin on Monday after all.

By 11 a.m., with the sun peeking out, tourists flocked to Central Park even though police officers shooed them away for fear of falling branches.

"I slept like a baby," said Steven Boone, a homeless man who rode out the storm in a shelter in the East Village. "Nowhere near as bad as I thought."

Despite the region's relative good fortune, many applauded the preparations for a worst-case disaster. Mr. Bloomberg strongly defended the drastic measures, which saw 9,000 evacuees enter 81 emergency shelters.

"I would make the same decisions again without hesitation," he said. "We're just not going to take any risk with people's lives, and the best scenario possible is you take the precautions and it turns out they're not needed."

The city lifted a highly unusual evacuation order of low-lying neighborhoods a day after residents of Zone A — including Coney Island, the Rockaways and Battery Park City — were ordered to leave for their own safety. (The city's zoned labels showed signs of outlasting the storm's more tangible effects. Viktoriya Gaponski, a fashion blogger, said on Twitter that she planned to "only date Zone B men from now on. Less dangerous than Zone A, but edgier than Zone C.")

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey reopened the city's three major airports on Monday morning.

The storm caused several deaths in the region, including at least three in New Jersey. Celena Sylvestri, 20, was driving to her boyfriend's house when she was caught in flood waters in Salem County. Ms. Sylvestri called police to say she was

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In Buena Vista, N.J., in Atlantic County, officials scrambled to evacuate three dozen elderly residents from trailer homes that were threatened by sudden flooding.

The police also said a 39-year-old volunteer rescue worker for Princeton Township's Rescue and First Aid squad was in critical condition on Sunday after he was injured while trying to make a rescue in swift-moving water at 4:30 a.m.

There were close calls in New York City, as well. In the Bulls Head section of Staten Island, dozens of people stood on their nearly submerged porches to flag down firefighters who took them to safety in their rafts. The flood waters had swallowed rows of parked cars, angering at least one resident.

"I was like, 'This hurricane isn't cool anymore,'" said Safina Skaf, 27, who woke up to find her new sport utility vehicle underwater. "Please go away now."

In Brooklyn on Sunday afternoon, bars flung open their windows and sidewalk cafes set up outdoor tables as businesses and patrons looked to make up for a lost Saturday night. The Greenlight Bookstore in Fort Greene said it was packed less than 10 minutes after opening around 2:30 p.m. Across the street, Habana Outpost served margaritas and planned to play a movie outdoors as long as the weather cooperated.

Others found poetry in the gales of wind and sheets of rain.

"You may not see this again in your lifetime," said Teddy Ferris, 55, an East Village resident who had refused to evacuate and had taken a seat along the East River on Sunday morning. "This is beautiful. This is nature at its best."

Reporting was contributed by Peter Applebome, Joseph Goldstein, Michael M. Grynbaum, Sarah Maslin Nir and Jennifer Preston.

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