

Council deals with aftermath of storm

Written by Kyle Arnoldy

A group of concerned citizens had their voices heard at the Tuesday, April 16 City Council meeting. Sharon Jones, Yesenia Bencomo and Olga Sullivan expressed their concern about the reaction time to the damage caused by the April 8 storm at the Holyoke Mobile Home and RV Park.

After the storm, Jones told council members that she was shocked and amazed by the conditions of some of the homes. Damage included missing roofs, holes and debris being blown about in the wind. Some were still living without hot water.

“As a school counselor, my job deals with the emotional side of kids, because if they aren’t feeling safe at home, if they are not fed, they’re not going to learn, period,” Jones said.

“It’s my job to do all I can to make sure our kids feel safe, and when I went out to that trailer park and noticed the damage, I was sick to my stomach because I just had this feeling that there were kids who were not safe, that were not receiving proper care or the necessities of life.”

Much emphasis was put on reaching out to these families to determine if they were safe.

“I am not asking anybody to go build anybody a brand new home or give them thousands and thousands of dollars; I simply wish that we would have taken the time to truly talk to people that live out at the trailer park and ask them, ‘How is your home?’” Bencomo explained.

Jones and Bencomo began making calls to families and organizations to see what could be done to help those in need following the storm. Red Cross, who had already begun assisting one family in Holyoke who did not live at Holyoke Mobile Home and RV Park, explained that they would return if the homes were deemed uninhabitable.

It was noted by the ladies and members of the board that communication with families was difficult as many spoke only Spanish, but the ladies pointed out it was not impossible as they

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had translators lined up to assist Red Cross.

Red Cross contacted David Churchwell, council member and first assistant chief with the Holyoke Volunteer Fire Department, to address the living conditions of the three trailers. Churchwell did not feel being a council member authorized him to make such decisions, and as he is not the fire chief at HVFD, he decided to contact Mayor Orville Tonsing.

Mayor Tonsing and Police Chief Doug Bergstrom determined that the homes were adequate for living. Because the homes were not classified as uninhabitable, Red Cross never came back.

Some confusion may have prevented Red Cross from offering help. Tonsing and Bergstrom were under the impression that the homes that were the worst off were abandoned, but it turns out a family did in fact occupy one of the trailers.

Questions were raised on who has the authority to deem a property as uninhabitable. City Superintendent Mark Brown stated that no one on the board is specifically licensed to inspect homes. The HVFD only has the authority to inspect a home if they feel there is an imminent fire hazard.

Brown also questioned why Social Services could not determine if the homes were habitable, as they had with the family Red Cross was able to help, but no answer was offered.

Bencomo stated that she wished those who were involved with the decision would have taken the time to talk to the families.

“We need to be aware that we do have citizens in this town that may be afraid to share their voice, might not know how to share their voice or simply just don’t know,” Bencomo said. “Part of what I am here for is to urge our city council to please keep those people in mind.”

During the hectic evening of the storm, city crews and law enforcement were out attending a

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handful of situations. Brown stated that he was unaware of the damage at the mobile home and RV park until the next day and that the park manager had never made a call to inform them of problems.

Sullivan expressed her feelings that the storm is an opportunity for Holyoke to establish protocol for emergency situations so that help is available immediately as opposed to a week or two later.

City officials report

City workers have had their hands full with picking up after the storm, Brown said. Along with several uprooted trees and damaged buildings, the airport had two totaled planes and a good deal of debris came to rest in the sewer lagoon.

Brown also made mention of four power outages. A squirrel on a power line was responsible for the loss of power in the 400 block of West Emerson Wednesday, April 3. The following day, a dove caused an outage on the same block.

Saturday, April 6 was the planned power outage, which Brown said went well. Monday, April 8 was the final outage as Holyoke endured a vicious spring storm.

Bergstrom reported that from March 28-April 11, the department received 60 calls for service, made one arrest, wrote three reports and gave out 13 warnings.

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Other business

In other business April 16, the council:

—agreed to hire Lori McWilliams, Meg Strauss, Brittney Prottzman, Jentry Andersen and Ana Conklin as new lifeguards at the pool.

—agreed to donate \$1,500 to the Holyoke Volunteer Fire Department for training and education.

—approved travel request for Brown to attend Action Now Seminar in Sterling.

—approved request from Melissa Memorial Hospital Foundation to use the pool free of charge for Competition Day, Saturday, July 13.

—agreed to hire Theresa Tharp as the summer recreation director.

—agreed to donate \$100 to the Holyoke Post Prom Party.

—reappointed Brown as city superintendent, Kathy Olofson as city clerk/treasurer, Bergstrom as police chief, Al Wall as city attorney and David Colver as municipal judge.

—agreed to remove old poles and leave the concrete at an airport hangar that has been vacated since the April 8 storm.

—approved a purchase request from Chief Bergstrom for a Lexmark X738 DTE multifunction

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printer for a total of \$3,259.

—approved a liquor license renewal application from KarDale's.

—granted Holyoke Hotel, LLC a conditional liquor license, pending background checks.

—entered into executive session for 25 minutes to discuss purchase, acquisition, lease, transfer or sale of real, personal or other property interest.

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