



Fargo police, one vehicle in front and one in the rear, escort semi trucks on 45th Street North as they carry sandbags to Fargo neighborhoods with deliveries that started Tuesday to protect homes from the rising Red River as the late snowmelt starts to speed up. Dave Wallis / The Forum

Police escort sandbag convoys to destinations

By news@inforum.com on Apr 23, 2013 at 11:44 p.m.

FARGO - Complete with police detail, some 300,000 sandbags made their way into north Fargo throughout the day Tuesday.

It was just the start of an effort to deliver 526 loads in three days to neighborhoods where the sandbags will be strategically placed for volunteers to build dikes up to 43 feet, under the plans city officials were following Tuesday.

Fargo officials may lessen sandbag plans today in light of the possibility that the flood won't be as bad as once expected, said City Administrator Pat Zavoral. He said the city may build its protections to 40 feet instead of 43 feet.

In total, 16 flatbed trucks delivered 300,000 bags into north Fargo neighborhoods all day Tuesday, said Jeremy Gorden, Fargo transportation engineer.

Two police vehicles with lights flashing and sirens sounding are bookending each four-truck convoy.

"If you don't live on the street, you're really hardly going to notice because we're getting delivered during the daylight hours," Gorden said.

Deputy Chief Pat Claus said each of the convoys will stretch for about a city block, and the police escorts aim to move them through intersections "in an efficient manner" to reduce traffic congestion.

Police-escorted convoys also were used during the flood fights of 2009, 2010 and 2011.

Claus said there's a misperception that the city has a lot more time to prepare for this spring's flood. He noted the Red River is projected to hit major flood stage on Sunday, and sandbags can't be placed in neighborhoods when temperatures are too cold or they will freeze.

"We're not necessarily running behind or ahead. We're running on time," he said.

Gorden said if the river level prediction were to be lowered, the city would at least be prepared for a worst-case flood with sandbags already deployed.

"If we have to load the trucks up and they don't get used - trust me, it'll flood again. So they'll get used in the future," Gorden said.

The Police Department is maintaining regular staffing levels during the three days of convoy runs, Claus said. Officers are volunteering to work overtime for convoy duty.

With eight shifts running roughly 12 hours a day, the convoy duty will result in about 288 hours of overtime for the Police Department, which made the decision to provide police escorts for the convoys, Claus said.

City Finance Director Kent Costin said the overtime costs could become eligible for federal reimbursement if the state receives a presidential disaster declaration.

Motorists who see the convoy's flashing lights approaching from ahead or behind must pull over to the side of the road and give the convoy as much room as possible, or turn off the road if time allows, Claus said.

"We are talking about four semis loaded down with sand," he said. "They don't stop on a dime."

Those caught failing to yield for a convoy are subject to a \$50 traffic ticket.

Claus said the focus isn't on enforcement but rather on educating the public about why the special measures are needed during flood preparations.

By Tuesday afternoon, the convoys were running smoothly and on schedule, and officers hadn't issued any tickets for failure to yield, Deputy Police Chief Dave Todd said.

"I think everybody's doing great at helping us out and moving over," he said.

Sandbag delivery will shift to south Fargo today and Thursday.

Today's stops will include the Fargo Country Club, Southwood Drive, Harwood Drive and River Drive. Thursday's deliveries will target Copperfield Court,

Oakcreek Drive, Prairie Rose and Johnson Farm, Todd said.

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