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Record Snowstorm Blitz

BY JOHN TOSCANO

After weathering a ferocious, blinding 24-hour record snowstorm over the weekend, Queens residents awoke Monday morning to another ordeal—digging out their cars and otherwise clearing away snow and, for many people, going slipping and sliding to work despite the snow and slush that made travelling hazardous.

Generally, however, the borough, like the rest of the snow-covered city, took the record 26.9-inch snowfall in stride, as residents sloughed off minor inconveniences and pitched in with the cleanup.

No fatalities were reported anywhere in the city, and there were few reports of crimes or severe injuries.

Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly chalked up the low crime level to a strange phenomenon: bad weather brings out better instincts. "People talk to each other when it's snowing," he said.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg had high praise for the snow-fighting job done by the Department of Sanitation. Sanitation crews were on the streets "since before the first flake touched the ground," the mayor commented.

On Monday, Bloomberg praised Sanitation Commissioner John Doherty for a job well done over the weekend, and expressed his thanks for the helpful timing of the storm, telling Doherty, "Very clever of you to have the snowstorm come on a Saturday night, Sunday morning, and then three warm days afterward."

On a more serious note, Doherty had Sanitation enforcement units out in force four hours after the end of the storm, giving out \$100 tickets to anyone who failed to clear their sidewalks. He said only a small number of summonses had been issued because enforcement agents were otherwise occupied supervising a small army of temporary workers who were pressed into service to clear the snow away.

Doherty's first priority Monday morning was removing snow piles at 300,000 street corners to make intersections passable and to make sure sewer drains were cleared. The warm weather was already creating small floods as the snow melted, creating another hazard for people crossing streets. The watery slush would also create another major problem later on as the sun went down, the temperature dropped and the slush froze.

In all, Doherty had 2,200 snowplows and 350 salt spreaders at work early Monday morning.

Elsewhere, public schools were open, and Catholic schools in Queens had the choice of either opening or closing. Subways and buses were operating with some interruptions because of the snow residue.

Kennedy and LaGuardia Airports were open, LaGuardia opening at 6 a.m. Monday. Normal flight schedules were in effect, but many flights were cancelled, as not enough planes were available. The aircraft had been flown to other airports to wait out the storm, which could have damaged them.

Despite the good intentions of Sanitation workers clearing snow from Queens streets on Monday, borough residents had to deal with the inescapable fact that when a narrow street is plowed, there's no place for the snow to go but back to where a car had been dug out or a driveway cleared.

In one such case, a truck with a 12-foot plow clearing snow on 63rd Avenue near Sauters Street in Rego Park succeeded in getting the middle of the street cleared, but at the same time re-buried a car which had been dug out not long before.

The cleanup continued yesterday, again with a major assist from the weatherman. Schools reopened and airports and businesses generally were operating close to top capacity.

Doherty reported that temporary workers hired in the snow removal effort were providing a welcome helping hand. The workers, including some homeless persons, were paid \$10 an hour, or \$15 an hour after 40 hours. By late Monday, more than 500 had been hired, he said.

Restaurants and supermarkets, among the businesses that suffered from the weekend snow, did a quick turnaround Monday and yesterday as normal routines returned. However, delivery operations have been hampered over the past two days, as were other delivery-oriented businesses.

As expected, with schools closed on Monday and many people forced to stay home from their jobs, most parks in the borough and many streets provided all the necessary elements for a snow holiday. Sleds and an assortment of other makeshift contraptions for having fun in the snow could be seen everywhere, piloted by kids wearing ear-to-ear smiles while parents



Photo Vinny DuPre

pleaded with them to be careful.

The nice weather on Monday also provided an opportunity for walking, as auto traffic in the city was at a minimum.

According to National Weather Service records, the weekend storm began around 4:30 p.m. Saturday and continued for about 18 hours, dropping a record 26.9 inches on the city.

From the start, the mix of falling snow and wind blasts made local streets and highways impassable, forcing businesses to stay shut as people opted to watch the white stuff pile up from inside their homes.

Buses and subways continued to operate, although encountering some delays as Sanitation snowplows hogged streets. Kennedy and LaGuardia Airports were forced to shut down, cancelling all flights and leaving thousands of travellers stranded and looking for shelter overnight. By 5 p.m. Sunday, the Weather Service recorded that 25 and a half inches of snow had fallen at LaGuardia Airport, indicating that the same amount of snow had probably fallen in areas around the airport, such as Astoria, Jackson Heights, Astoria Heights and parts of Flushing.

Surprisingly, almost no power outages were reported, probably because the snow was light and fluffy which did not cause tree limbs to break and pull down overhead power lines.

Bloomberg reported Monday morning that Sanitation workers had done "an incredible job, going round for round with this massive storm."

The mayor said 2,500 Sanitation workers had been called in at the start of the storm to work 12-hour shifts. The first 2,500 workers would then be replaced by another 2,500 to work the same shifts.

The mayor also praised the efforts of several other city agencies in battling the snow, including the Department of Transportation, which cleared the bridges, and the Police and Fire Departments, which maintained public safety despite severe conditions, and the Office of Emergency Management for coordinating responses through its Emergency Operations Center, and,

finally, the call-takers at 311 who helped to keep the public informed throughout the storm.

The snowstorm forced the cancellation of several events that had been scheduled on Sunday.

Councilmember John Liu (D-Flushing), chairman of the Transportation Committee, had scheduled a City Hall press conference to report on a Department of Transportation study on truck route management and community impact. He rescheduled it for yesterday at City Hall.

Also on Sunday, Liu, along with the NAACP and Asian Americans for Equality, had scheduled two community outreach fairs for the newly created East-West School of International Studies. The event was cancelled with no future date issued.

Assemblymember Brian McLaughlin (D-Flushing) on Sunday cancelled a press conference at the Queens Hospital Center in Jamaica where he was to comment on Governor George Pataki's proposed health care cuts in next year's budget. He said the meeting would be held at a future time to be announced.

Congressmember Anthony Weiner (D-Queens/Brooklyn) and Councilmember David Weprin (D-Hollis) were forced to cancel a press conference where they were to release a report dealing with some of what they said were "the most outrageous homeland security spending boondoggles." It will be rescheduled.

On Monday, Congressman Joseph Crowley (D-Queens/The Bronx) cancelled a luncheon briefing at Queens Borough Hall co-hosted by Borough President Helen Marshall. The briefing was to be on the topic of the security and intelligence needs of New York City and the nation. A talk on the subject was to be given by Congressman Alcee Hastings, the ranking Democrat on the House Subcommittee on Terrorism and Homeland Security.