

Park Hill road slides away

Kathe Tanner, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 3-4-10

Some homes on Park Hill were without water, sewer service and utilities early Saturday, Feb. 27, after heavy rain apparently triggered a landslide. Pacific Gas & Electric Co. reported that 1,078 customers lost power shortly after 12:35 a.m.

Utility crews have set up temporary service for affected homes and are assessing the safety of the area and how to make permanent repairs to the road, pipes, poles and wiring.

The slide took a 50-foot bite out of Pembroke Drive's pavement, plus a 6-inch water main, 8-inch sewer main and utility poles and service.

On Saturday, emergency crews cordoned off the area with yellow emergency tape to keep people away from downed electric lines and possible additional land-sliding.

However by mid-morning, some neighbors and curious Cambrians ignored the tape and stood near the edge of the slide.

The county Health Agency canceled on Tuesday afternoon an advisory about possible contamination of Santa Rosa Creek and the ocean nearby. Because of the sewage spill, signs had been posted for two days to alert surfers, swimmers and other beach users about potential health hazards in the water. However, health officials had waited until Monday to take water samples, according to Liberty Amundson, environmental health specialist. She said heavy rains can also produce higher

test levels of certain bacteria and pathogens.

The water-main break spilled about 200,000 gallons of water, making the slide even worse, according to representatives of the Cambria Community Services District. The watery cascade carried yards of dirt down the hill, depositing it against a retaining wall at the nearby sewage-treatment plant.

The storm Friday night and Saturday dumped about 1.5 inches of rain on the already soggy soil. It had been a busy weather day, with forecasting Web sites posting warnings and advisories for severe thunderstorms, special weather statements, flood advisories and a high surf advisory related to the full moon and the storm.

While it wasn't weather related, there was also a tsunami advisory posted due to the magnitude 8.8 earthquake in Chile late Friday night (Pacific Standard Time). While a small wave surge did hit the North Coast during the afternoon low tide Saturday, Feb. 27, it was barely noticeable and caused no damage or injuries. Hearst Castle Dispatcher Tracy McConnell said she could "see more of the pier pilings when the water went out," and the higher wave that returned "just looked like a wild, stormy ocean."

Slide after-effects

On Pembroke, the con-caved landslide area is approximately 50 feet long, 15 feet wide and 15 feet deep. The slippage took with it about three-quarters of the street width, leaving only enough pavement for an unreliable walkway.

The street, which serves as a secondary artery for those living in the neighborhood, will be closed to through traffic from Windsor Boulevard to above Bristol Street for the foreseeable future.

County road engineers are assessing the damage and drafting a plan to fix the area. Those repairs must be done before permanent utility poles can be reset.

Dave Flynn, deputy director of County Public Works, said Tuesday, March 2, that road-repair crews probably will have to wait several weeks to patch the road, perhaps until early May, so rainy weather can diminish and the area has a chance to dry out.

He said initial investigations over the weekend showed the uphill areas are stable and there's "no faulting that has an imminent movement or creep there. There are trees upslope, and they're not moving either. They're probably helping to hold the slopes together pretty well."

Jeremy Ghent, County Roads division manager, said, "The fact that all access and utilities are maintained will allow us to develop an engineered solution. The closure will remain for the coming months as we design a coordinated fix and get it implemented."

It was the third major water- main break since mid-December for the Park Hill neighborhood. The first two were due to pipe failures.

PG&E restored power to about half of the outage victims by 2:47 a.m., according to spokesman Kory Raftery. Crews installed temporary lines across the gaping hole by late morning, getting electricity to all but four customers by 1:34 p.m.; their power was restored by 3:40 p.m.

Showers and possible thunder storms were predicted for Wednesday afternoon, after press deadline. More rain is predicted for Friday and Saturday.