

Washington region blasted by winds, record-breaking snow

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The fiercest storm yet in the worst winter in local history howled across the region Wednesday, locking virtually everything in a shroud of new snow that will take days to escape. And there might be more on the way.

As the region tries to right itself after what increasingly looked like a lost week, just digging out from under a foot of fresh snow piled atop two feet of previous snow has left road crews and 5.5 million Washington area inhabitants exhausted. The storm that could arrive Monday seemed a trivial threat after all that, but it could compound the havoc played with virtually every rhythm of daily life.

"Most likely it will be a modest event," said Jason Samenow, chief meteorologist of The Washington Post's Capital Weather [Gang](#). "But the way this winter has been going, I wouldn't rule anything out." It's not clear to forecasters how much snow the storm could bring.

Local officials sought to have Maryland, Virginia and the District formally declared a disaster area, making the region eligible for federal funds to help already hemorrhaging budgets recoup the untold millions spent on snow removal.

"If there is ever a time for a state of emergency, this is it," said D.C. Council member Kwame R. Brown (D-At Large). "This District is not only facing a crippling snowstorm, but we're facing a crippling budget shortfall and citywide safety issues."

The federal government announced that it would remain [closed for a fourth day](#) Thursday. Most local governments and many private offices followed suit. All large area school systems already had given up until Tuesday, fearing for the safety of children forced into the street by unshoveled sidewalks. Utility crews were back at work, this time with fewer outages than the thousands caused by the weekend's heavier, wetter snow.

"Mother Nature has the upper hand right now," said Metro spokeswoman Lisa Farbstein. [Only underground Metro service](#) will operate Thursday, and Metrobus and MetroAccess will remain suspended. Montgomery Ride On, Fairfax Connector and MTA commuter buses are canceled Thursday, as are MARC and VRE trains. Amtrak's Northeast service will be limited. The region's three airports told passengers to check with their airlines Thursday before leaving to catch their flights.

As of 2 p.m. Wednesday, the snowfall total for the season in Washington had surpassed the 54.4-inch record set in 1899, and it rose to 55.6 inches by 4 p.m. It was even higher farther from the city, reaching seasonal totals of 72 inches in Baltimore and at Dulles International Airport.

"I never thought I would see a winter like this one in my lifetime," said Samenow, a native of the area. "The climate was colder back in 1899, when that record was set."

Samenow said that although the amount of snow Wednesday was surpassed by the weekend storm and the first big snowfall in December, neither of those packed the ferocity of the latest blast.

"It plastered the whole D.C. region," Samenow said. "This is a more intense storm than the one this past weekend. It's a deeper cyclone with lower barometric pressure and higher winds."

As the blizzard roared in, governments, from federal agencies to town halls, closed, many for the third day running. There was no school, no malls and no mail. Virtually all public transportation ground to a halt, with Metro running only underground trains at 30-minute intervals.

With winds gusting up to 50 miles an hour, a number of sport-utility vehicles flipped over. A 50-car pileup was reported near Williamsburg. Even National Guard Humvees got stuck in the snow. In midmorning, when visibility was near zero, officials in the District, Montgomery County and Alexandria told plow operators that it was too dangerous to keep working and that they should pull over until visibility improved.

A canopy collapsed at American University. A roof and a wall fell in at a Smithsonian Institution building in Suitland that houses artifacts. With thousands of pounds of snow on top of every flat roof, more cave-ins seemed inevitable.

Although there were injuries, there were no reports of deaths that could immediately be attributed to Wednesday's storm.

Officials pleaded with residents to stay off the road, saying their presence was hampering already difficult plowing operations.

The blizzard brought misery to life in the mid-Atlantic and northward, stretching from Northern Virginia to Boston. Hundreds of flights

were canceled, schools closed preemptively and buses stopped operating.

In Baltimore, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake imposed a driving ban, saying that motorists could be ticketed or have their cars towed if they were caught on the roads.

In Philadelphia, the state closed the expressways leading into Center City, and tractor-trailers were banned on the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

In New York City, the United Nations didn't open.

If there was a silver lining to this storm, it was this: Despite high winds and white-out conditions, people did not lose power in droves. About 11,000 customers were without electricity in the region by late afternoon Wednesday. That was far fewer than the 200,000 who lost power over the weekend. BGE, for example, had 35,000 outages during the latest storm, compared with 97,000 last weekend. Pepco recorded about 10,000 without power at the peak of Wednesday's storm; tens of thousands had no power Saturday and Sunday.

Pepco spokesman Robert Dobkin said the weekend storm already had cleared out weaker trees and branches. And this storm was characterized by light, dry snow, easily blown off by the winds.

"We're just not out of the woods yet," he cautioned, saying unplowed roads made it difficult to restore power to more than a few customers at a time.

Metro pulled off work crews that were clearing tracks and stations as blizzard conditions caused three- to five- foot snow drifts. It barricaded escalators at some stations to keep out the snow, leaving elevators as the only access. Strong winds blew a door off its hinges at the Largo station, Farbstein said.

The system was operating on single tracks Wednesday because it had stored so many rail cars in underground tunnels to keep them out of the snow. Farbstein said its employees are exhausted.

"We are seeing extreme fatigue in the staff," Farbstein said. "They have been dealing with snow for a solid week. People are working shifts, but they are physically and mentally exhausted."

Some people found pleasure in the swirling, gusty blizzard. Hundreds swarmed to Dupont Circle for a snowball fight. Drew Evans went down the U Street corridor on skis.

"It's better than walking," he said, at 13th and U streets.

Jon Kraus, 20, and Joanna Karavolias, 21, found their moods changed as they got soggy and chilled during a four-hour trek from American University, where they are students, to the Mall.

"It was a snow adventure," Kraus said. "You couldn't see more than 100 feet ahead."

But now, they were itching to get back to class.

"At first people were really excited," Karavolias said. "But now we are getting sick of it and going a little stir crazy."

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