

Maggie Valley residents escape massive mudslide

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By Clarke Morrison - February 7, 2010

MAGGIE VALLEY - As the torrent of mud, rocks and shattered trees battered her home, Tammy Jones dropped to her living room floor. She thought she was about to die.

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My first thought was there was a plane landing on the roof, she said. The house started to shake, then it was like being passed by a real close train. The mud was hitting the side of the house. It was incredibly loud. It was roaring liquid and crashing trees. Jones escaped unscathed after being trapped for more than an hour when emergency responders cleared mud from her basement. But her home and three others along Rich Cove Road were damaged in Friday night's massive mudslide that forced the evacuation of more than 40 people from their mountainside dwellings. Emergency officials said it's remarkable no one was hurt or killed. A wall of debris some 30 feet high roared down the mountain north of downtown for about 3,000 feet, clearing a path 175 feet wide in places down to bare earth and bedrock, said Rick Wooten, senior geologist with the N.C. Geological Service. The debris flow crossed over Rich Cove Road several times before subsiding around 6:30 p.m., about a half hour after it started, officials said. Recalling the 2004 mudslide that washed away 15 homes and killed five people in the Macon County community of Peeks Creek, Wooten said it's fortunate that no homes in Friday's slide took a direct hit. If there were houses in the direct path, there probably would have been fatalities, he said. An initial geological assessment of the area Saturday showed the ground remains very unstable, with Soverwhelming potential for further slides, said David Teague, Haywood County's public information officer. It's unknown when residents will be able to return to their homes or when the road will be reopened, Wooten said. Officials planned to use a N.C. National Guard helicopter today to get a better handle on the stability and safety of the area. Meanwhile, an emergency shelter set up by the American Red Cross at Maggie Valley United Methodist Church will stay open as long as needed, said Kim Czaja, director of the agency's Haywood County chapter. Eating a breakfast of pancakes, eggs and bacon at the shelter Saturday morning, Ray and Cookie Dye recalled the terrifying moments when the slide struck. The muddy water was flying down that road like a creek, Cookie Dye said. We were thinking our house was going to go. It was very scary. Greg Shuping, the county emergency management director, said police, firefighters and other emergency responders went door to door telling people to leave and ferrying many out. The Dyes jumped into the back of a pickup to make their escape. Their driveway was damaged, but not their house. Jo Anne Littrell also was in her Rich Cove Road home when the mudslide started roaring. Trees were snapping like they were toothpicks, she said. I was so scared. I got on the phone and called 911 while it was still happening. Wooten said investigators don't yet know what caused the slide, but heavy rain and snow were certainly factors. The National Weather Service said the Maggie Valley area got as much as 2 1/2 inches of rain Friday on top of at least 6 inches of melting snow. Investigators believe breached retaining walls at Ghost Town in the Sky amusement park at the top of the slide area could have played a part, Wooten said. He estimated that thousands of tons of dirt and rock were released from the area where the retaining walls failed. An attempt to reach Ghost Town managers for comment was unsuccessful. There have been previous slides in the area, one as recently as December, but they were far less severe, he said. Wooten said Rich Cove Road was heavily damaged, and state

Department of Transportation officials are working to determine the extent of the damage and how long it will take to repair it. The road provides access to the amusement park.

Geologists determined the height of the debris flow by measuring how far up the mud reached on trees. Emergency workers used ATVs Saturday to help some residents get back to their homes to retrieve items such as clothing and medicine. They also brought out pets that had been left behind during the mayhem.

Tammy Jones' husband, Kurt Biedler, was on his way to their home in the Walnut Acres subdivision when the slide struck. Their house was the most heavily damaged of the four.

â The back deck is gone, â he said. â The lower part of my porch is gone.

â Structurally, I believe the house is still sound. It could have been a lot worse. Now we clean up and move on. â

Jones said she was trapped in the house until responders cleared a path through the mud in her basement. But by then the terror of the slide had passed. â I thought the house was coming down, and when (the slide) went by and it got really quiet, I thought 'Thank God.' â

