

Water rescue prompts concerns over Pigeon Creek safety

Segann March Evansville Courier & Press
USA TODAY NETWORK

After a nearly two-hour water rescue effort Tuesday night that turned out to

be a false alarm, Vanderburgh County residents took to social media to express their concern over logjams and built-up debris on Pigeon Creek.

Many said the creek is unsafe for rec-

reation activities and wondered who was responsible for cleaning up excess logs in the murky creek.

See SAFETY, Page 2A

Safety

Continued from Page 1A

The answer doesn't appear to be a simple one, though.

County officials say the responsibility is shared by a number of agencies, municipalities and individual property owners depending on the location.

Billy Thorn, of Evansville, regularly kayaks with his friends at Pigeon Creek because of the tranquility. But as of late, he doesn't think it's safe due to a large logjam and other debris.

"We still do go, but it is so dangerous," Thorn said. "There are about two areas where you physically have to get out of your kayak, onto the logs and back in your kayak... it takes a lot of strength, adrenaline and nerve. We would rather go to a safer place but sometimes we chance it after high water hoping it cleared them out. But that's never the case."

So, what happened Tuesday?

Dispatch received a call about an overturned kayak on Pigeon Creek near Cardinal Drive and Stringtown Road around 8 p.m. Tuesday.

Michael Bradfield, 38, who reported the incident, said he and his friend were scared when they noticed the overturned kayak and quickly went over to get a closer look. They couldn't find anyone, so they called the police to check.

"We looked around and didn't see anyone," Bradfield said. "I thought they had just flipped over and floated downstream. But then the more we thought about it, the more we got worried."

Officials said a few witnesses saw someone slumped over near the water's banks, but those statements were un-

founded. Evansville Fire Division Chief Mike Larson said two kayakers came across the unoccupied kayak and reported it to authorities.

For nearly two hours, divers, rescue boats and drones were used by various agencies to look for the missing kayakers. Once the debris was cleared, a rope team pulled the kayak out of the water to make sure no one was lodged underneath.

At 9:16 p.m., Evansville resident Noah Ashley posted on Facebook claiming the kayak was his. Ashley said he and his friend got stuck in a logjam and abandoned the kayak. The Vanderburgh County Sheriff's Office confirmed the story with Ashley, and the search was called off around 9:45 p.m.

Who's responsible for log jams and debris in Pigeon Creek?

Bradfield said he wishes the City would clear out the "ongoing" pileup of trees at the Stringtown Bridge. He kayaks in Pigeon Creek frequently and said the bridge is the most dangerous part and keeps getting worse.

However, the City of Evansville doesn't have sole ownership of Pigeon Creek, according to Vanderburgh County Surveyer Jeff Mueller.

He said property owners on the creek, the county and the US Army Corps of Engineers also own individual portions of Pigeon Creek.

Cliff Weaver, director of Evansville-Vanderburgh Emergency Management Agency, said flooding hasn't been an issue with the creek this year.

"It's difficult to get a boat up and down the creek like that if it's full of logs," Weaver said. "It makes it more complicated for public safety if it's full. It could affect things down the road, and it is something that needs to be attended to."

Mueller said the County is only responsible for overseeing logjams issues if they are against the pier(s) of a County bridge, stating, "If it's blocked and up against the bridge piers, then that might be the county's issue."

Tuesday night's incident occurred underneath and near the Stringtown bridge.

When asked what the County would do about it if it was their responsibility, Mueller said to call Commissioners or County Engineer John Stoll for answers.

Calls to commissioners and Stoll were not immediately returned.

Navigating the water

Weaver said all boaters should have safety equipment and let someone know where they are when boating.

Vanderburgh County Sheriff Dave Wedding said navigating Pigeon Creek can be extremely dangerous for inexperienced boaters, kayakers and canoe enthusiasts or those who cannot swim well.

"You can easily capsize a watercraft and find yourself in trouble," Wedding said. "Pigeon Creek is a pretty murky body of water with a lot of unknowns in it, including debris and landscaping particles from high water. You have stuff floating everywhere. Take someone with you. You just never know when you're going to have an unusual event."

If a kayaker or boater capsizes on a local body of water, they need to report it to authorities immediately, Wedding said.

"It puts public safety in a precarious situation," he said. "Just let us know if you had a boat mishap, where it's located, when you're coming back for it and if all parties involved are safe. That way, those passing by won't panic."