

# Mill River Flood-Control Gate Deployed to Protect Downtown Northampton for First Time in 50 Years

by David Reid

**DPW  
Workers  
Hustle  
to  
Protect**



On Saturday morning, DPW workers were busy installing floodgates to stop the Mill River from flooding downtown. (David Reid photos)

## Downtown Northampton from Floodwaters as Hurricane Irene Closes In.

NORTHAMPTON – Route 66 was closed early this Saturday morning and a flood-control device erected to block expected floodwaters from the Mill River as Hurricane Irene approached Western Massachusetts.

During Saturday, the exact path of the Category 1 storm and its intensity over the Connecticut River Valley were hard to pin down, but forecasters said 5-10 inches of rain and strong winds were to be expected. (See the *Republican* Newspaper's latest story on MassLive by [clicking here](#).)

By late morning, the Route 66 flood-control barrier – steel braces, wooden ties, plywood and sandbags – was in place and the road closed until the threat of flooding passes. Detour signs directed westbound traffic from downtown through the Smith College campus, up along the earthen-and-stone dike that separates the river from the college and from low-lying areas of downtown.

Edward “Ned” Huntley, director of the city’s Department of Public Works (DPW), said the flood-control structure that straddles West Street (Route 66) – built by the **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers** in 1940 – had not been employed since the mid-1950s, although practice drills have been held periodically.

After conferring with Army Corp officials on Friday morning and teleconferencing with city public safety officials that afternoon, Huntley ordered West Street closed this morning and the flood barrier erected.

Mayor Clare Higgins’s office issued a press release announcing the road closure, the use of the Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School as an emergency shelter (the original version mistakenly said it was the Northampton High School), and safety tips from the city Fire Department. (To see that press release in its entirety, [click here](#).)

The meeting in Higgins’ office was called as weather forecasters predicted that Hurricane Irene, then a Category 2 storm heralding from the North Carolina Coast, was headed directly for central and Western Mass.

Among those meeting with Higgins in her office Friday were City Council President David Narkewicz, Police Captains Scott Savino and Joseph Konkas, Assistant Fire Chief Duane Nichols, Deputy Fire Chief Christopher Norris, and Central Services Director David Pomerantz. Huntley and City Engineer James Laurila were driving back from the Army Corp. of Engineer’s meeting, and telephoned in.

A primary concern of city officials was the threat of flooding Sunday and Monday from a peaking Mill River, as 5-10 inches of rain in the watershed was anticipated over the weekend, Huntley said. The Connecticut River will take longer to peak, he said, because of its many tributaries to the north. Connecticut River flooding could pose a problem for Island Road and Rt. 5, he said.



West Street (Route 66) is closed to thru-traffic at Smith College dike until the threat of Mill River flooding ceases.



Traffic from downtown on Route 66 was blocked and rerouted through Smith College campus because of the Mill River floodgate.

Another flood-control gate system is available for use along Route 5 and the Boston & Maine (Pan Am) Railroad, which parallels the Connecticut River south of the city.

A network of earthen-and-stone dikes like the one along the Mill River also help protect the city from Connecticut River flooding in the Meadows section of the city. And a pump station at the city's Hockanum Road DPW facility is readied to force-pump stormwater accumulated from downtown city streets into the Connecticut River.

Updates will be available on the [city's website](#), and live readings on flood conditions in the city can be found on a separate [DPW website](#) page devoted to real-time monitoring of river levels.

All public safety staff, including fire, police and DPW workers, will be on duty or on call throughout the weekend. Area utilities are also preparing for the storm, and are anticipating service and power outages. (To see today's story from *Patriot-Ledger*, [click here](#).)

The Mill River once flowed under the West Street bridge, then turned east to flow directly into downtown, under what is now Hampton Avenue, and to the Connecticut River between Pleasant and Conz Streets toward Hockanum Road. After the floods and hurricanes of the late 1930s, the Army Corps of Engineers redirected the Mill River south toward the Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary in Easthampton, and eventually to the Connecticut River.

During today's installation of the floodgate, Council President Narkewicz, who becomes acting mayor on Sept. 9, arrived at the scene with other city officials, including Board of Public Works Member Gary Hartwell. While Northampton Media was there, outgoing Mayor Higgins – who is leaving office four months early for another job – drove by to check on the work.

One resident told Northampton Media he received an automated phone call from the city alerting him to the road closure.

And city Police Chief Russell Sienkiewicz said he had, over the past several days, communicated with emergency services providers, public safety agencies and aid agencies throughout the region on the best response to the storm.

For more photos of the West Street floodgate, the city's Hockanum River pumping station and other photographs, go to Northampton Media's [Facebook page](#).

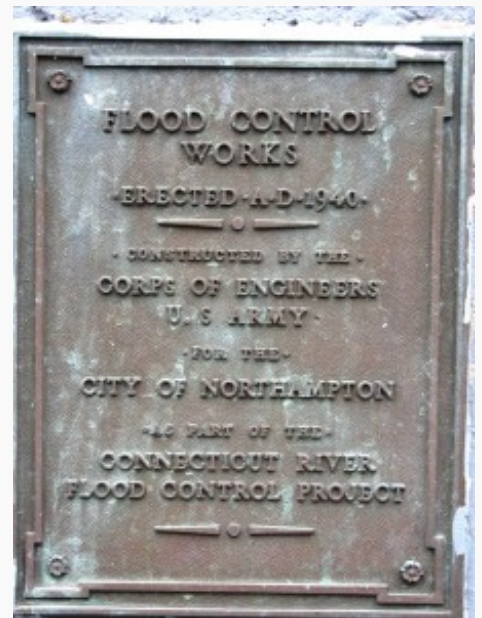
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Public safety officials at the dike floodgate (from right) BPW member Gary Hartwell, City Council President Dave Narkewicz, DPW Director Ned Huntley and Police Capt. Joe Konkas (with folded arms).



A plaque commemorating the dike and floodgate's construction by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1940.





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