

Slip Sliding Away. Icy Concerns

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Peterborough Fire & Rescue

To the food enthusiast, the word 'ice' usually has some sweet associations... ice cream, ice coffee, Italian ice. But there's nothing sweet about ice jams. And folks, we have the perfect conditions for them to be served up along our rivers during the early spring months. Since Peterborough and surrounding towns still have several feet of snow on the ground and temperatures to maintain a thickness of ice on our rivers, we may have to deal with the potential for ice jam flooding.

Ice jam flooding occurs when warm temperatures and heavy rain cause rapid snow melting. The melting snow combined with the heavy rain causes frozen rivers to swell. Rising water breaks the ice layer into large chunks, which float downstream and often pile up near narrow passages or near obstructions such as bridges and dams. The jam may then build up to a thickness great enough to raise the water level at a rapid rate and cause sudden flooding.

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Peterborough, located in the confluence of the Nubanusit and the Contoocook Rivers, has been included in three federal disaster declarations since 1987. It is subject to a variety of natural hazards including flooding and river ice jams. The town has more than 40 dams, two of which have been classified as high hazard dams.

Structures and individuals who live close to rivers and streams are most at risk for the adverse affects of flooding. What can residents do to prepare for that possibility? First of all, stay tuned to your local weather station for alerts and learn the appropriate terminology. A **Flood Watch** means a flood is possible in your area. A **Flood Warning** means flooding is already occurring or will occur soon in your area. Also, make a list of necessary items and important papers you would take with you when you leave your home in response to a flood warning. Keep this list in an obvious place for all family members or employees to see. Have a plan for evacuating pets as well.

What should you do when a flood warning takes effect? Depending on how close you are to the river's edge, it could mean you have as little as 30 minutes to evacuate your dwelling. Retrieve the items from your prepared list, head for high ground and stay away from the water. Ignoring the force of swift, flowing water by walking, swimming or driving through it is asking for sopping trouble. Never drive through water flowing over a road and respect road closure signs and barricades. Nothing is more tragic and senseless than persons killed by floodwaters who drive around barricades because it "looks safe to me". It isn't! That's why the barricade is in place.

Now, a graver concern. Associates have told me that they've observed children playing, sliding and hanging out on local river ice. **Please, please** forewarn them that this is incredibly dangerous. While a pond may freeze over and be safe for a period of time, rivers are never safe because of the underlying current flow. How do you know if pond ice is safe? Check it! According to the New Hampshire Fish & Game Dept., start at the shoreline and, using an auger, spud, or axe, make test holes at intervals as you proceed. There should be a minimum of 4 to 6 inches of ice to support a few, well-dispersed people; 6 to 7 inches for small, on-foot, group activities; and at least 8 to 10 inches for snowmobile activities. If ice at the shoreline is cracked, slushy or squishy, stay off. Don't go on the ice during thaws. If a pet wanders onto and becomes trapped on questionable ice, do not attempt a rescue. Call the Peterborough Fire & Rescue at 924-8090 for assistance with this treacherous job.

Hmmm...I believe I did quite a job shaping 'ice' into a negative word. But, if you're like me, you are dreaming of warmer temperatures and the promise of balmy, springtime activities at which point ice will no longer be daunting. Rather, it will be brimming with sugar and passing our lips as a most welcome sweetness.