

Two lives claimed in tragic highway washout

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A departing Hurricane Ida, which dumped anywhere from 6 to 11 inches of rain, depending upon where you were in the county, left a terrible tragedy in its wake.

An approximately 50-foot section of Hwy. 26 washed away, leaving a chasm some 30-foot deep at the top of what is known as Bud Moody Hill, just yards away from the Crossroads Methodist Church. The washout took place at about 10 p.m. on Monday night during a heavy rainstorm with vehicles traveling in both directions on the two-lane state highway. Seven vehicles plunged into the chasm before traffic could be stopped.

Sheriff Keith Havard said one of the individuals involved in the accident called 911 to report the tragedy shortly after 10 p.m. Heavy rains were falling at the time. George County Sheriff's deputies were among the first on the scene to stop traffic.

There were 2 fatalities and 10 people injured. Three of the injured were in critical condition, according to a statement released by the Mississippi Highway Patrol.

Jerry Lee, 49, of Lucedale was pronounced dead at the scene by George County Coroner Dee Ann Murrah at 1:20 a.m. Kent Brown, 49, of Leakesville was pronounced dead at the scene by Murrah at 1:30 a.m.

Of the 10 injured one of those is George County High School senior Layla Jamison. Family members reported Tuesday morning on social media she was in critical condition at USA Medical Center undergoing surgery for multiple injuries. A student/parent led prayer vigil was planned to take place Tuesday night at the high school parking lot.

Names of the others injured were not available as of press time. Four of the victims were transported to George Regional Hospital in Lucedale, according to CEO Greg Havard. Of those, one was admitted, two were transferred to other hospitals and one was treated and released.

Hwy. 26 is a main thoroughfare across George County, going from Lucedale through Wiggins in Stone County to Louisiana. The Hwy. 26 bridge across the Pascagoula River, which divides the county from north to south, is the only access residents have from one side of the river to the other. A bridge at Merrill was closed in 2012. Traffic is currently being rerouted through Jackson County to Hwy. 57, or to Hwy. 98 in northern George County.

Schools in George County were closed on Tuesday as a result of the washout and ensuing accident.

“First and foremost, our thoughts and prayers go out to all of the families affected by such a tragic event,” said school Superintendent Wade Whitney. “This is one of the most tragic events I have ever experienced in either my personal or professional life.

“Due to the large number of bus routes and school commutes affected by the collapse of Hwy. 26, we really had no choice to close schools for today. We now need to sit down and evaluate and analyze all of the bus routes

and logistics that need to be addressed and make decisions that are the most safe and efficient for our students and bus drivers.”

At the washout site, there is a ditch several feet deep on the north side of the road with a culvert passing under the highway. On the other side there is a deep drop-off to a branch falling away through the woods. The heavy rains apparently caused the water to build up several feet deep on the north side of the highway, perhaps even washing over the highway or washing out the culvert causing the highway to collapse.

The huge volume of water cut through the roadbed carrying big chunks of the pavement downstream. While the chasm is only about 50 feet wide, parts of the highway appear to have collapsed and fallen away for at least another 50 to 75 feet.

“I have spoken to MDOT district representatives this morning (Tuesday), this is going to be a largescale repair project,” said George County Board of Supervisors President Henry Cochran. “MDOT is working on timeframes right now. This is going to take several weeks. Hwy. 26 is a major east and west corridor. This road collapse is going to affect commercial trucking, logging and residential traffic.”

“Photos don’t do this justice,” commented one of the spectators at the scene Monday morning.

In addition to Sheriff’s deputies and George County first responders, local firefighters and Mississippi Highway Patrol personnel worked to extract the victims and transport the survivors to hospitals.

A large wrecker was unable to get close enough to pull the wrecked vehicles out of the pile-up. American Tank and Vessel rushed a tracked crane to the scene and crews worked until nearly 5 a.m. lifting the wrecked vehicles out of the chasm.

“It was a tremendous effort,” Havard said. “I want to thank everyone involved for the outstanding work they did. In my 30 years in law enforcement, I have seen pileups and accidents, but I have never seen anything like this.”