

# Epic Roanoke, Blacksburg snow day halts work, spurs play

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REBECCA BARNETT | The Roanoke Times

Liesl Kellam, 6, and brother Elliot, 8, play in the snow outside of their home in Roanoke. "It's kind of hard (to sled) because the snow is so deep," Elliot said.



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Greg Yates of Roanoke uses a snowblower to clear a portion of Winborne Street Southwest on Thursday morning. Yates said he bought the snowblower six years ago, and this is the first time he's getting to use it.



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Record-breaking snow held Southwest Virginia captive Thursday, blanketing the region in a dose of winter that plagued drivers but otherwise left the area free to enjoy a day off.

Roanoke's final snowfall measurement was 19 inches, the third-largest storm total on record and the largest 24-hour accumulation to hit the city in 18 years. It easily surpassed December 2009, when a storm dumped 17.8 inches.

The National Weather Service said Blacksburg registered 20.1 inches by 5 p.m., making it the third-highest storm total recorded there as well.

Unofficial spotter reports from around the region were even higher, with some spots receiving upwards of 25 inches by late afternoon.

The storm crippled area thoroughfares, leaving main routes like Interstate 81 and U.S. 220 completely covered in snow into the evening. Local roads were largely impassable even with four-wheel drive, and across the area, even snow plows and fire trucks were left trapped.

For a time, I-81 south in Salem was shut down, and southbound traffic was diverted off the interstate in Botetourt County due to several tractor-trailers stuck in the snow. Ramps onto Interstate 581 were impassable for much of the day, prompting state police to shut them down, too.

Major delays along I-81 persisted for much of the day, with traffic backed up more than 13 miles in Montgomery County about 4 p.m. and in Pulaski County at 6 p.m. The congestion hindered snow plows that were trying to clear that part of I-81, according to the Virginia Department of Transportation. Montgomery County declared a state of emergency Wednesday from the storm, according to spokeswoman Ruth Richey.

VDOT spokesman Jason Bond said the agency was simply unable to keep roads clear thanks to bands of snow that moved through the area which at times brought two inches of snow an hour.

Regional snow removal crews plowing I-81 and primary roads, challenged already by prolonged and heavy snowfall, watched much of their progress turn white again as the snowstorm resumed Thursday afternoon.

As a result, independent contractors working along I-81 and elsewhere for VDOT or the department's own crews struggled to keep highways and roads clear and had plowed and treated few secondary roads by early afternoon, Bond said.

"The next issue might be drifting [snow]," he said.

Nearly all secondary roads in VDOT's Salem District were in "severe" condition Thursday afternoon, which means they had not been plowed or treated at all and likely contained several inches of snow.

Treacherous roads remain a concern overnight.

Refreezing and drifting snow are two of the biggest concerns for Virginia Department of Transportation and other emergency workers as temperatures drop overnight while snow and ice still cover a majority of the roadways.

Thursday night road crews were still focusing on the primary roads and interstates that had refrozen after sunset. Interstate 81 remained one of the largest traffic problems. At 9:30 p.m., I-81 north near mile marker 103 in Pulaski County was closed down due to severely icy conditions. Traffic has been backed up for more than 10 miles in that area for several hours.

VDOT expected the road to open back up some time after midnight.

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A winter weather advisory is in effect until 10 a.m. Friday, according to the National Weather Service in Blacksburg, urging people to watch out for blowing and drifting snow overnight as well.

"It could be a very long time before we get to the secondary system," Bond said. Bond said VDOT's goal is to have roads in the region passable 48 hours after a storm ends. Officials continue to urge drivers to stay home unless necessary, even today.

Lots of people took this message to heart. Several hotels off I-81 reported being at capacity after guests came to avoid traveling. The Hampton Inn near the Hollins exit was booked, with 80 percent of guests arriving because of weather, according to the general manager. He also said about 25 percent of those customers worked at nearby businesses.

The nearby Country Inn & Suites by Carlson, which has 77 rooms, booked all but about 19 rooms Wednesday, said Linda Peterson, a front-desk clerk for the hotel. "We had quite a few check in who were stranded last night," she said. In Roanoke, city officials reported Thursday afternoon that most main roads still had compacted snow on them, and residential streets were largely snow covered. Valley Metro bus service was shut down for the day, and trash collection was suspended.

Residents in other areas in the region found similar conditions.

By 4 p.m. Thursday, the Virginia State Police said it had responded to 151 traffic crashes in its Salem district, which encompasses most of Southwest Virginia to the North Carolina line. Troopers had also assisted 250 disabled vehicles and fielded 699 other calls for service.

Roanoke's police department responded to 86 traffic wrecks between 2 p.m. Wednesday and 2 a.m. Thursday, a spokesman said. At least 14 of them involved injuries.

There were no immediate local reports of serious injuries or fatalities related to the wrecks. In Loudoun County, the state police said they were investigating the

death of a VDOT worker who was struck by a VDOT dump truck. And in Halifax County, a man died Wednesday in a vehicle wreck likely caused by the weather. There was good news, though. Appalachian Power Co., the region's largest electricity provider, reported few customers without power during the day. The utility had said Wednesday that it was staging crews in the area in preparation but were hopeful that the type of snow forecast would work in their favor. Most government offices in the area, save for emergency services, will be closed today. The Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport, which was shut down Thursday, said it hopes to have its airfield open by 7 a.m. Friday. *Staff writers Dunacn Adams and Tiffany Holland contributed to this report.* [ [Get the latest snow updates from Kevin Myatt.](#) ]