

One year later, Ellicott City's Main Street marks rebirth from deadly flood



Sun Pacylowski, owner of 'Precious Gifts' in Ellicott City, reflects on the past year after the terrible flooding in 2016. (Kim Hairston / Baltimore Sun)



By **Pamela Wood**
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As rising **floodwaters** rushed past her Ellicott City gallery that Saturday night a year ago, Robin Holliday thought maybe, just maybe, she could keep the water out.

She pulled the front door shut and stuffed bubble-wrap into the mail slot. Then the door frame cracked, glass shattered and water came rushing into HorseSpirit Arts Gallery.

Holliday scrambled across tables and counters to a back staircase and an upper floor, where her staff was huddled. Together, they watched as the torrent of brown water tossed trash cans, debris, cars. When the flood finally receded, five inches of mud coated the gallery floor, and scores of artworks — paintings, pottery, jewelry — were destroyed.

Holliday knew right away what would come next.

“It never occurred to me not to rebuild,” she said. “I never even went down that thought path.”

Ellicott City leaders and residents on Sunday are marking **the first anniversary of the sudden flood** that killed two and cost the historic Main Street area tens of millions of dollars in damage and lost business.

A year after the disaster, they say, Main Street — a quirky mix of restaurants, art galleries, thrift stores and gift shops that has attracted hundreds of thousands of shoppers, diners and visitors annually — is coming back.

Howard County has spent \$10.8 million to repair roads and sidewalks, stabilize stream beds and make other fixes. County Executive Allan Kittleman last week announced another **\$18 million in long-term work** upstream on the Patapsco River to slow the flow of water and, officials hope, reduce the likelihood of a repeat.

Ninety percent of businesses have reopened, officials say, and more than 70 percent of households have returned.

After the flood, officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency asked Kittleman how long he expected it would take to get most of Main Street functional.

The county executive estimated two to three years.

They didn't think so. More like 10 years, they said.

“To think about that, and think where we are now, I think we're definitely ahead of schedule,” said Kittleman, a Republican. “But we have a long way to go. I don't want anyone to think that we're done.”

More than six inches of rain fell in two hours last July 30, causing the Tiber and Hudson branches of the Patapsco to **swell to historic levels**, jump their banks and send torrents down Main Street. Water gouged away sidewalks, revealing basements and building foundations, and swept dozens of cars into the river. Trees toppled into buildings and blocked streets. Water coursed through busted doors and windows. Mud covered floors and walls.

Two people — 35-year-old **Jessica Watsula** of Lebanon, Pa., and 38-year-old Joseph Anthony Blevins of Windsor Mill — were killed. Locals blame the flood for later claiming a third life, when 67-year-old Precious Gifts owner **John Peter Pacylowski Jr.** died in a fall from scaffolding while repairing his store in September.

University of Baltimore analysts, commissioned by the county, concluded the storm cost Ellicott City \$42 million in lost economic activity and \$18 million in lost wages.

Ellicott City had flooded before — the river rose more than 14 feet during Tropical Storm Agnes in 1972 — but this time the water came so fast and so destructively that some predicted it would take years to recover.

“I could not envision how we could possibly come back,” said Jon Weinstein, a Democrat who represents Ellicott City on the Howard County Council.

“We still bear the scars, no doubt,” Weinstein said. “But we are much farther along than I expected. It’s near miraculous, I think.”

Brendan Nass lost both his fledgling gallery and his home in the flood. He had opened the gallery, Pistachio, just two weeks before the flood, and lived in an apartment upstairs.

Nass got back into his apartment in November and reopened Pistachio in April.

“It’s really crazy how fast a lot has come back,” he said. “It gave everyone a chance to restart. It was a terrible, tragic event, but everyone has found the good in it.”

The flood has caused a shuffling in the district’s business community. Some businesses reopened in their same locations; others moved to new ones. Some closed for good; some spots, left vacant, attracted new businesses.

Gaping holes remain. The sites that housed the restaurants Cacao Lane and Portalli’s, for example, remain empty. Cacao Lane is being remodeled to house retail shops; Portalli’s is under construction with signs promising the restaurant will return.

The Rumor Mill Fusion Bar & Restaurant on Tiber Alley off Main Street, where workers led patrons up ladders and onto the roof to escape the flood a year ago, is closed. Owner Matthew Milani announced this spring that he took a job as a chef at the governor’s mansion.

Joan Eve Classics & Collectibles was located in the building that suffered the worst damage in the flood. A car crashed through the front of the building; still closed, it’s covered by boards painted to mimic the look of the old shop. Owner Joan Eve Shea-Cohen ended up moving to a new spot down the street this summer.

In her new storefront, Shea-Cohen and store designer Gary Weltner set up a “survivor’s window,” stocked with merchandise that survived the flood.

“People ask me all the time, ‘Do you worry every time it rains?’” Shea-Cohen said. “I said, ‘I can’t do that.’”

“First of all, I’m 74, so if it happens again and I live through it again, I’ll retire.

“We have no control over Mother Nature. I’m just going to enjoy it,” she said.

The clothing boutique Sweet Elizabeth Jane also moved, from the former Caplan’s department store. The large space was nearly obliterated by floodwaters.

Sweet Elizabeth Jane reopened in November inside a large two-story building on Main Street that in the 1920s housed Ellicott City’s first Ford dealership.

"I didn't think I would be here," after the flood, said store owner Tammy Beideman. "This journey has been the hardest year of my life, and I know that once we get past this, I will be able to look back and realize how much I've learned."

Sweet Elizabeth Jane's old spot, in the Caplan's building, has been taken by Miss Fit, a women's gym that moved from Catonsville.

Holliday, the HorseSpirit Arts Gallery owner, lost \$55,000 in art work that wasn't covered by flood insurance. But she was able to cover her losses with a grant from the Ellicott City Partnership — a business group that gathered donations — and a series of fundraisers and contributions from friends and well-wishers.

Just thinking about it makes Holliday tear up.

"The generosity far exceeded how badly my insurance company behaved," she said. "I had never experienced anything like this in my life."

The Ellicott City Partnership helped dozens of shop owners. The nonprofit set up a website for donations that collected \$1.825 million, executive director Maureen Smith said.

In the first days after the flood, the partnership gave gift cards and emergency assistance to those who were displaced. Later, it helped businesses pay for professional mold and water remediation, replenishing inventory and covering the gap from months of lost income.

The partnership has largely ended its assistance to individual residents and merchants, Smith said, and is now focused on boosting the profile of the town as a whole. She said the partnership's Continue the Recovery campaign will pay for marketing, events and possibly the cost of keeping on a retail consultant provided by the Small Business Administration whose contract runs out in September.

Another group, the One EC Recovery Project, has taken over the job of assistance to individual residents, businesses and property owners. The county government pledged \$50,000 to that effort this week.

There have been challenges drawing customers back to Main Street — and especially to the lower portion of the road, where several badly damaged buildings remain closed. Merchants say the rainy weather on weekends this spring and summer hasn't helped.

"It's very hard right now," said Young Hwan Lee, a newcomer to Main Street who moved his shop Lamp & Gift there in February. While the county touts the 90 percent figure for open businesses, Lee said it seems as if only half of businesses at the bottom end of the street are open.

Lee moved to Main Street from the Westfield Montgomery Mall in Bethesda for the mix of antiques shops, galleries and other retail that he thought would complement his handmade Korean paper lamps. But empty storefronts and restaurants near his store means he doesn't have the foot traffic he expected.

“I want all of the stores open soon, I hope,” Lee said.

Despite the challenges, Smith said she thinks foot traffic is greater than it was before the flood, and more people walking down Main Street are carrying bags from stores.

Some of that may be attributed to “disaster tourism,” she said, as people are curious to see what the town looks like now.

The challenge for businesses and restaurants, she said, is to make that foot traffic stick by offering products shoppers want and a customer experience people will enjoy. Business owners have more of an incentive than ever to bring in customers, as many now are bearing the cost of paying back rebuilding loans or paying higher rent for their improved properties.

“People want to be back,” she said. “They want people in there so they can generate income.”

A majority of residents have returned to Main Street, too, many to apartments that sit on upper floors above shops. The county says 71 households were displaced by the flood and 51 have returned.

John Beck, who has rented in the historic district for 45 years, said it often seems as if people forget that Old Ellicott City is not only a business district, but a residential community.

"A lot of people that come into town think of Ellicott City as like a theme park," Beck said.

Some have seen opportunity emerge from the flood. Don Reuwer, whose company Waverly Real Estate Group owns about 20 buildings on Main Street, bought up a few more from property owners who wanted out after the flood.

Reuwer said he never regretted his choice to stake his company's success on Main Street. He said he knew he wanted to get his properties reopened for tenants as soon as he could.

“It was pretty devastating,” Reuwer said. “But quickly, the first thing we did was like: ‘OK. Let’s get going. Let’s get it cleaned up.’ ”

Reuwer said his son, Trae, leads a team that’s been renovating the company’s buildings, updating them with more water-resistant materials such as faux-wood tile floors instead of hardwood and plastic wallboard instead of drywall — just in case of future flooding.

In some of his buildings, Reuwer used the opportunity to make upgrades, such as enlarging the kitchen at Tea on the Tiber, a Victorian tea room and gift shop.

Reuwer said the flood brought together business owners and residents, and spurred fresh conversations about the future of the town and what it needs to flourish.

There's a group working on bringing public art to Main Street. Officials, leaders and residents are working on a new master plan for the area that will consider ways to reduce flooding, and guidelines — and limits — on future development in the watershed.

Those have already been controversial topics, and will be again. But given the events of the past year, arguing over Ellicott City's future seems better than wondering if it will have one at all.

“The town's way more exciting than it was,” Reuwer said. “Everybody's moving in a good, healthy direction.”

FLOOD COMMEMORATION

Several events are scheduled in Ellicott City this weekend to commemorate the deadly and damaging flood on Main Street one year ago.

Sunday

All day: ApprECiation Day. Discounts and specials at stores and restaurants.

8 a.m.: Free Yoga and Meditation. Main Street Yoga, 8167 Main Street.

11 a.m.: Backyard Brunch. Businesses on the Tonge Row Courtyards will offer specials.

1 p.m.: Museum of Howard County History. Museum is open until 5 p.m. featuring “A River Ran Through It” exhibit at 8328 Court Avenue.

2 p.m.: “Last Call on Main Street.” Paint in the Hut offers a Main Street-themed painting event for \$49 at 8167 Main Street.

3:30 p.m.: Once EC Community Worship Service of Hope & Healing. Held at St. Paul's Catholic Church, 3755 St. Paul Street.

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