

An F3 tornado touched down in Craverwood around 5 p.m., heavily damaging the downtown area and leaving half the city without power. According to Mayor Ella Cox, emergency operations are working in full force to provide support to those affected.

"First and foremost, our thoughts are with every resident affected," said Cox, at the press conference.

"Right now, our top priority is everyone's safety. Firefighters from neighboring communities are assisting with search and rescue efforts. Many homes and businesses are considered unstable as of right now. We ask that everyone stay off the roads unless absolutely necessary so that first responders can continue to do their jobs."

Several buildings have collapsed or are in danger of collapsing in and around downtown Craverwood, including the Bank of America. A warehouse on the outskirts of the downtown area has collapsed after an electrical fire, trapping several Craverwood firefighters inside and blocking the road for two fire trucks. Firefighters from the neighboring town of Colvardville are on the way to assist with search and rescue, stated Fire Chief Ria Mark.

Citizens in the downtown area are currently being evacuated and officials urge citizens to stay away from the area at the time. At least three fatalities and 20 injuries have been reported, according to Police Chief Keely Bradle.

"We currently do not have an exact count of how many people have been hurt or killed," said Bradle. "We will give an update once we have a better idea of the total effects. We are currently working with volunteers and neighboring departments to execute search and rescue teams for those unaccounted for."

The tornado took out power lines throughout the city, leaving many places using backup generators.

"The generators at the 911 call center are working, but it might be hard to get through to them," said Mark. "Please only call if necessary." Duke Energy is working on restoring the power lines.

According to Cox, officials are working on opening emergency centers at Norm Elementary and the two YMCAs near the downtown area. Cox is in contact with Governor Josh Stein about getting support from nearby cities.

As heavy thunderstorms continue to move through the area, Aidan McCollick, a FEMA representative, urges those who are in need of shelter to come to one of the three locations stated above "ASAP."

Following storms could cause flooding and water damage to already unstable buildings, so use caution when travelling to the shelters.

Many of the roads in and around the downtown area are currently inaccessible, said Izzy Espoile, the director of transportation services. Until further notice, public transportation services are suspended.

"Buses are being redirected to assist in evacuation efforts and to support emergency personnel transport," said Espoile.

Roads are expected to reopen in three to five days. Many of the schools outside of downtown are safe to attend, but will be closed for three to four days as the community recovers from this disaster. Norm Elementary School will remain closed until the downtown area is safe and all Norm Elementary School students will attend Cotswold Elementary until then.

The last tornado to hit Craverwood was in 1982, which caused two dozen fatalities. After that disaster, the city implemented tornado sirens around the city. While those sirens acted as a warning for our citizens this time, more still needs to be done to ensure the safety of Craverwood citizens in the event of another hurricane. Officials plan to rebuild the downtown area with stronger infrastructure with hopes of reducing the damage done by future storms. The rebuilding of downtown will cost millions of dollars and take around six months.