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'Like an asteroid struck': Bella Vista residents survey damage after massive water main break

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Stunned Bella Vista residents are surveying the damage of a Sunday morning water main break that sent rivers shooting down a block near 6th and South streets and flooded scores of basements.

"It looks like an asteroid struck," said neighbor Denise Shubin, surveying a roughly 20-foot hole at 6th and Bainbridge streets.

The break was first reported around 12:30 am, according to the Philadelphia Water Department, with crews arriving about half an hour later to begin shutting down a ruptured 30-inch pipe. The city said midday Monday it does not yet have estimates for the number of properties damaged, the cost, or the timeline for repairs.

"It is very early in the process, as PWD and other impacted utilities are currently investigating the site of the break so we can make it safe for excavation and begin repairs," said PWD spokesperson Brian Rademaekers in an email.

On Monday morning, weary neighbors in a roughly one-block area shuttled water-logged items onto the curb and mopped up lingering pools. Several reported four-to-five feet of water in their basements.

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Among them was Mike Shenkman, who lives on South 6th Street and hurried back from vacation when he got the bad news.

“We got a call at two o’clock in the morning from our neighbors that there was a bit of a river gushing down our block,” said Shenkman. “It was gushing [into our basement] like a waterfall all night long.”

Most of the damage, Shenkman said, was to items of sentimental value, and they’re trying to figure out what’s salvageable.

Artist Daniel Dalseth has worked and lived a half block from the site of the main break since 2004. He noticed something amiss when he went to pour himself a glass of water right before bed and the faucet only produced a trickle.





Water-damaged possessions are piled at the curb on 6th Street near Bainbridge Street, where a water main erupted. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

“I thought, that’s strange,” Dalseth said. “Then I came outside and saw the street had blown up and called 911.”

He kept thousands of dollars worth of welding and carpentry equipment in his basement workshop. He hopes some of it will still work when it dries out.

Over the past four years, Philadelphia has averaged 771 water main breaks per year, according to PWD. The city has about 3,200 miles of pipe, which means there are roughly 24 breaks per 100 miles. That’s around or [slightly below national averages](#), but higher than [nearby cities such as New York and Boston](#). There have been an estimated 439 breaks so far this year.

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The pipes at 6th and Bainbridge were among the 15% of city mains installed before 1900. All of those mains are made of cast iron.

A [study from Utah State University](#) found the number of water main breaks in the U.S. and Canada increased 27% between 2012 and 2018. The break rate for cast-iron pipes has gone up 43% over that period, researchers found.

Anita Brook Dupree and her husband, James Dupree, have lived at the corner of 6th and Bainbridge streets since the late 1970s and run an art gallery on the first floor. They were storing much of James’s artwork in the basement as they renovated the first floor

for a show slated to open in three weeks.



Philadelphia artist James Dupree stacks water-damaged paintings outside his gallery at 6th and Bainbridge streets after a water main break that flooded nearby homes and businesses. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Most of James's artwork was off the ground and escaped relatively unharmed.

"There is some damage, but it's not as bad as I thought it might've been," said Brook Dupree.

James Dupree and a handful of workers spent Monday morning ferrying canvases out of the basement and examining them on the sidewalk as they dried.

Asked how he was feeling about a day after the flood, Dupree was philosophical, noting that he'd survived five knee surgeries, a stroke, and an [eminent-domain battle with the city](#).

“I’ve lived long enough and had enough situations in my life,” he said. “I gotta keep it positive.”

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