

Princeton, New Jersey - Rescue Teams Plan to Be Ready

In anticipation of a wetter future, Council approves purchase of high-water rescue Vehicle from Eastern Surplus & Equipment Co.



Princeton will soon have a high water rescue truck, similar to the one above, to move into flood waters otherwise too treacherous even for standard emergency vehicles.

Photo Credit: www.easternsurplus.net

By Carolyn Jones

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Princeton, NJ -- On the night of September 1, 2021, in the midst of Tropical Storm Ida, Keith Wadsworth had been pulling people from rising waters for hours when the call came in. A man on Rosedale Road had driven around the barrier and was stuck. Could the Princeton Fire Department effect a rescue? Wrapping up operations near Mountain Avenue, where Wadsworth had been plucking motorists from flooded cars, he and his crew sped toward the scene.

For Wadsworth, 33, a third generation Princeton firefighter as well as a specialist in ocean rescue, this Rosedale Road case still stands out. "This was one of the big ones," he said.

It continues to stand out to elected officials, too. On October 9, a little more than two years after that harrowing rescue, the Council approved the purchase of Princeton's first high water rescue truck, at a cost of more than a quarter of a million dollars.

The man on Rosedale Road, who has never been named, had driven around the police barricade. Possibly he thought he knew the road well, said Wadsworth. But like many people, he had not anticipated the power of water, nor how quickly a benign creek becomes a battering ram during a storm. Indeed, the Stony Brook, which crosses Rosedale Road, rose rapidly that night and breached the bridge. By the time responders arrived, the brook was moving at the speed of a class 5 rapid, the man's car was pinned against the guardrail, and the driver himself was perched on the roof.

Firefighters tried to reach the man by inflatable boat but the current was too strong. Responders were especially aware of their colleague, Michael Kenwood, who had died there 10 years earlier trying to conduct a similar water rescue.

"We had an entry team ready," Wadsworth said, but given the speed of the water, "we couldn't put them at risk."

The emergency vehicles available in Princeton that night weren't equipped for swift water rescues. The high water trucks Princeton usually borrowed from other towns were already deployed in their own communities. Scrambling, emergency dispatchers looked further afield.

A high water rescue truck set out from Pennsauken Township, but under even the best driving conditions, it was an hour away.

Meanwhile, Stony Brook continued to rise and the car began to shift. Above the noise of pounding water, falling trees, and swiftly-moving debris, the man shouted to the firefighters to tell his wife he loved her. He didn't think he would make it. Wadsworth admitted he didn't either, especially when the car pontooned over the bridge and the man disappeared.

When roads become rapids

As Princeton's director of emergency services, Mike Yeh's job is to keep residents safe. Intense storms such as Ida, as well as increasingly heavy rainfall due to climate change, occupy his mind. He worries about motorists who drive around barriers, or who are stranded on suddenly flooded streets. He also worries about the safety of the EMTs. In the last three years alone, Princeton has carried out 16 water rescues, as well as countless interventions to move drivers to higher ground.

"The water may seem still," Yeh said, "but you can't see how fast it's moving beneath the surface. During intense storms, it can rise in seconds. You think water seems serene but when you see a roadway flooded, no one should ever drive into it."

Yet during storms, some motorists do.

As the remnants of Tropical Storm Ida swept through New Jersey that night two years ago, 30 people died, most of them in their vehicles or swept away by flash floods. In many cases, the water rose so quickly that police did not have a chance to barricade the roads. Princeton's emergency services alone received almost 400 calls for help, and responders worked a 48-hour shift as they scrambled to get residents to dry ground.

The man on Rosedale Road was lucky. As his car washed away, he grabbed a pole and climbed it, holding on until a state helicopter airlifted him to safety. Meanwhile, Wadsworth's crew deployed to a situation further downstream. A driver was trapped near Quaker Road, wedged against the Stony Brook's rushing waters inside his rapidly-sinking car. The firefighters stayed on the scene until a ladder truck

arrived from Trenton. It wasn't equipped for water rescues either. Regardless of damage to the vehicle, the truck drove partially into the water and the combined crews saved the man. (Click [here to see police body cam video](#) taken during the rescue efforts.)

When Princeton becomes an island

For Yeh these incidents loom large. "Ida hit the north end of town, which is a little bit less populated," he said. "It would have been far worse if the storm had really impacted everywhere."

He referred to the intense storms in Bucks County this summer as well as the flash floods in New York City in September. These "newer weather events" are on his radar as his crew prepare and train for increasingly hazardous conditions. Also, when the streams rise during intense storms, the town is cut off from the mutual-aid partners with whom they share rescue equipment.

"Princeton becomes an island," said Yeh.

To this end, he's grateful elected officials supported his request to effect safer and more timely rescues and approved the purchase of Princeton's own high water rescue truck. Eastern Surplus & Equipment Co., which specializes in rescue vehicles, will deliver the truck next year. Mayor Mark Freda, who is also the president of the Princeton First Aid and Rescue Squad, which will share use of the truck, presided over the vote.

The high water rescue truck has all the amenities a flood-prone town might want. According to the bid specifications, Princeton's vehicle will boast military-grade tires, a marine-grade rescue canopy, and a front winch able to bear a 17,000-pound load. It is designed to ford water 50 inches deep and can handle steep slopes and grades. It can also carry more than 20 passengers, making it suited for home evacuations if needed. Decked out in specialized body paint and customized lights, Princeton's new high water rescue truck will be a welcome sight for anyone caught in a flood.

The cost of safety

Its hefty price tag may be less welcome to taxpayers. At \$258,000, this is a new expense to the municipal budget. According to the Council's resolution, the majority of the costs will come from the town's capital budget, and a smaller portion will be paid from operational funds. There will likely be additional costs for maintenance and insurance.

This year's municipal tax rate increased by 5.7 percent. Within the municipal appropriations for public safety, which includes police, dispatch, fire safety and emergency management, the budget increased by \$628,000 from last year. Yeh confirmed that the cost of the high water truck will be covered by this appropriation, as will the costs of safety equipment. Also included is the increased training needed to respond to all-hazards situations, not just floods.

"This high water truck is a low frequency but high risk piece of equipment," said Yeh. He saw it as the price of increasingly complex emergency preparedness in the face of more extreme weather events.

"We've never seen the amount of flooding, even in areas that have not been impacted before," said Yeh. "FEMA is looking at how to classify these events. They used to call them century storms but across the country, there's been such a huge change in the amount of rain they produce."

Yeh acknowledged the impact on municipal, state and county budgets, but pointed toward the larger goal. "At the end of the day, our responsibility is to ensure our residents are safe."

How to avoid a ride on the rescue truck

Despite the eye-watering cost of the truck, Yeh surely hopes Princeton residents will not take a ride on it. "Number one safety tip," said Yeh, "If you're not on the road [during a weather event], don't get on the road."

But he acknowledged that sometimes storms intensify rapidly, catching drivers unaware. In this case, Yeh urged motorists to constantly take note of their surroundings, to move to higher ground, and to wait it out. If the roads have been blocked off, drivers should not drive around the barricades.

“Your life is the most important thing,” said Yeh. “You should not put yourself or the emergency responders in danger.”

Yeh urged residents to be prepared for any situation, not just those related to floods. The emergency responders themselves train and prepare for all types of hazards, and he asked residents to do the same.

“The local resources will always be there for you,” he said, “but if it’s a big event, we might be inundated dealing with different emergencies. If you’re prepared to manage any incident for 72 hours, you’re going to be in great shape.” Yeh pointed residents to the federal website www.ready.gov for specific tips.

During the next big storm, Princeton motorists might be wise to remember the man on Rosedale Road. “Turn around,” said Yeh. “Don’t drown.”