

Richmond Fire Department Water Rescue Briefing



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Mission and Vision Statements

Mission:

To provide high-quality emergency and non-emergency services to the city's residents and visitors.

Vision:

To ensure fire safety in the home and workplace, and to be "there when you need us, every day, every call, every time."

- We align our operations with overall city safety goals.
- We emphasize our alignment with community safety.

Richmond Water Rescue History

- Fire Department was organized October 25, 1858: 166 years of service.
- Water rescue operations began in the late 1960's.
- Water rescue team was formalized in the early 1970's. (surface & dive)
 - Fire Station 13: 2 Water Rescue Units (8 FF's on duty per shift)
 - Fire Station 20: 1 Water Rescue Unit (4 FF's on duty shift) added in 2012
 - Fire Station 25: 1 Creature Craft/Low Head Dam Unit (4 FF's on duty shift)
- In 2010, we began to focus on education and prevention.
 - **Bike teams on and around the James River park system**
 - Fire personnel at the river to engage visitors on river safety

Outreach and Education



Water Rescue Operating Environment

- The Richmond Fire Department's Water Rescue Team has the unique challenge of operating in an urban environment with Class III—IV--V whitewater rapids.
- Class IV rapids “require practiced rescue” teams and rescue in all higher-classed waterways is often needing professionals to have a significant chance of success.*
- While such rapids are typically found in rural areas, our team operates in a city, where we have embraced – and therefore must safeguard – our many river-goers and the Richmond whitewater rafting community.





Water Response Readiness

- Typical river rescue response package:
 - 3 Swift Water Rescue Units
 - 3 fire engines, 1 truck (and the closet engine company to the incident)
 - 1 Battalion Chief
 - 1 Safety Officer
 - 22 total personnel total
 - Daily, 9 of our responders are Swift Water Rescue Technicians, meaning they have successfully completed training to match National standards.
 - Three per team and currently certifying additional personnel.
 - We are now self certifying for the first time in our history.

Water Response Incidents-Activity

First or second busiest water rescue team in Virginia, depending on the year.

- 2022 - 121 responses
 - Two drownings on Memorial Day
- 2023 – 118 responses
 - Two drownings in the James River
 - A 9-month-old drowned in tub
 - A 20-year committed suicide in the tub
 - One attempted suicide from the Belvidere Bridge
- 2024 – 99 responses YTD
 - 9-year male child drowned

Water Rescue Team Effectiveness

- Through extensive study and recording of the river's rocks and rapids, we navigate precise, consistent safe routes through major rapids.
- Our team uses specialized inflatable boats designed for whitewater rescue operations.
- Without these boats, saving victims would either be impossible or require traversing steep embankments using complex rope systems, delaying response and increase fatality risks to responders and to civilians.

Water Rescue Team Effectiveness Cont'd

We've refined our boats and operator skills becoming one of the few teams nationwide capable of deploying under whitewater conditions.

Our three-boat system—a primary rescue boat, a backup, and a safety boat—allows us to respond swiftly and safely.

Few departments in the state can launch three-boat crews within minutes, providing life-saving capacity to remove individuals from the water quickly and safely.



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James River Common Response Areas

- James River (broadly)
 - Hollywood Rapids
 - Pony Pasture
 - Texas Beach
 - James River Walk Pipeline Walkway
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- A series of four yellow dashed line segments are arranged in a curved path in the bottom right corner of the slide.

Typical Flash Flooding Response Areas

Vehicle-in-water responses


- Magnolia St./Rady St.
- Mosby St./Littlepage St.
- Whitehead Rd./Derwent Rd.
- Bainbridge St./W 21st St.
- Hull Street Rd./37th St.
- Commerce Rd./Maury
- Richmond Hwy/Maury
- Marx St./E 5th St.
- I-95NB/SB below Belvidere St. Overpass

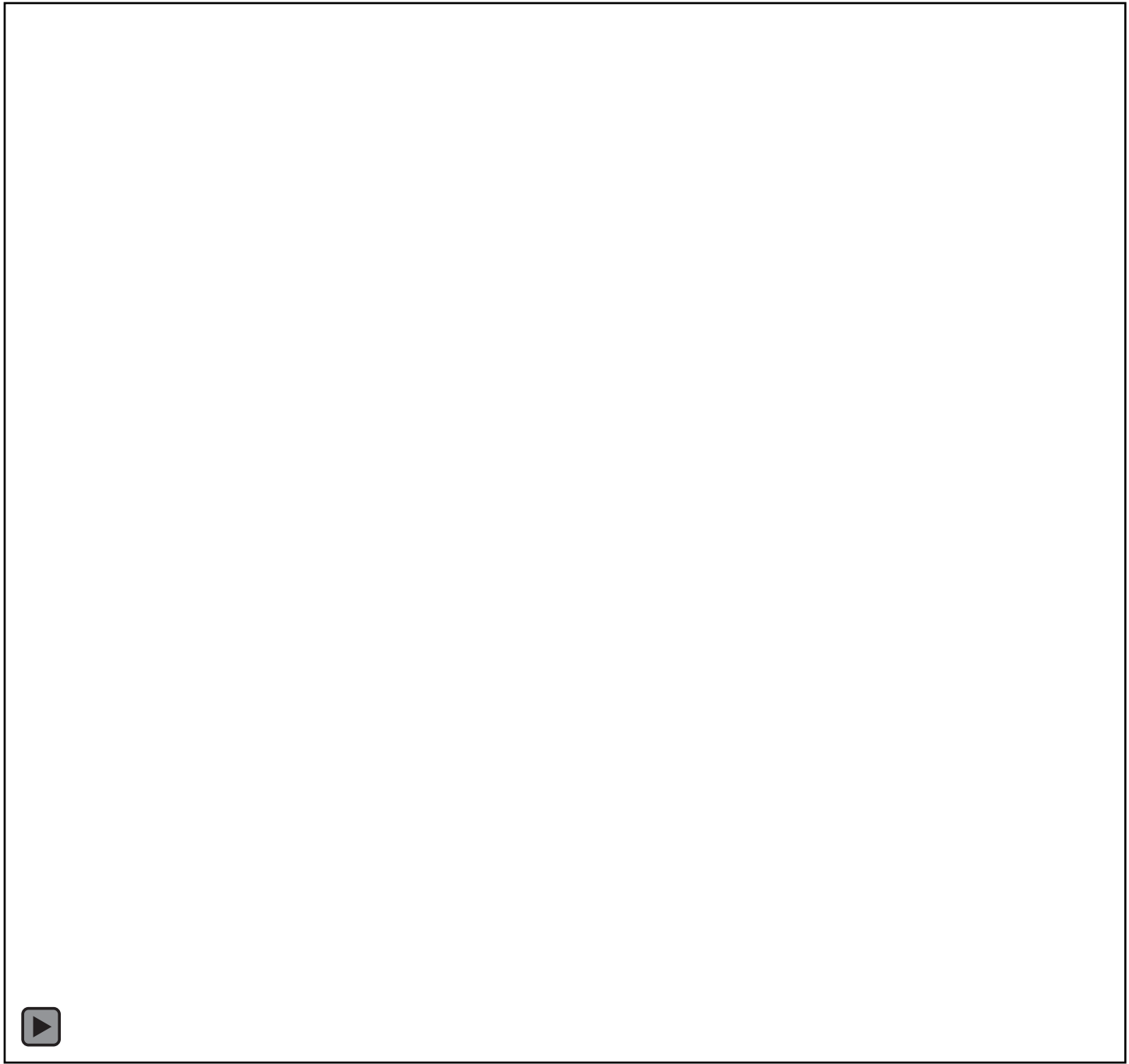
Areas of Concern For Rising River Levels

- Belle Isle Dry Rocks
 - Campers/hikers frequently are stuck on mid-river rocks as the water rises.
- Islands upriver from the Mayo Bridge host camps of the unhoused.
 - This population gets stranded during high water events.
- Brown's Island and Haxall Point present a similar challenge.
- Texas Beach
 - Visitors cannot leave the safety of river rocks when water rises.
- Reedy Creek (High Risk/Low Frequency)
 - During high rainfall events, Reedy Creek runs dangerously fast, increasing risk frequently used by recreational paddlers.
 - We tend to run storm-related calls and vehicle-in-water calls here whenever the creek runs higher.



Water Rescue Partners

- Parks and Recreation
 - Public Works
 - The Virginia Port Authority
 - US Coast Guard
 - Virginia Department of Fire Programs
 - VA Department of Emergency Management
 - Marine Incidents Response Team (MIRT), which protects the Richmond Marine Terminal.
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Question and Answer

