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## Pittsfield Responders Recover Drowning Victim

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Pittsfield and state first-responders search for a reported drowning victim.

*Update, Wednesday, June 26, 2013 at 4:00 p.m. :* The body of a drowning victim in the Housatonic River near the Mill Street dam was recovered after responders sandbagged the pipe's intake, alleviating the water flow that was pinning the body to grating inside the pipe.

The recovery came more than 24 hours after the man was reported missing in the river at 11:40 a.m. on Tuesday.

"After conferring with engineers and DPW, utilizing resources — Wahconah Welding for their crane operations and



**Giant sandbags were used to stop the flow of water down the spillway and instead redirect the flow into another pipe.**

Roto-Rooter for their underwater cameras — we were able to sandbag the area, which alleviated the suction on the tube and we were able release the body," Deputy Fire Chief Michael Polidoro said Wednesday afternoon. "Our divers recovered him within less than a minute."

Police have now taken control of the body. The victim, said to be in his late teens or early 20s, has not been identified but was reportedly from Los Angeles.

Wednesday morning, firefighters, police, private companies and city Highway Department workers were on scene working with engineers from the state to derive the sandbag idea. The body was being held against the grate by the high pressure of the water and the sandbags were placed in a position to reroute the flow through another pipe.

The night before, workers were unable to slow the pressure with the use of a steel plate nor were they able to simply pull the body out. The pressure was too much for divers to go into the spillway.

"We operate on safety factor. We made sure everything was in place and in the process no one would get hurt,"

Polidoro said.

The American Red Cross and Hinsdale Fire Department were providing rehab.

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*Update: 9:45 p.m.* Fire Chief Robert Czerwinski said the body is too tied up with debris to be removed from the pipe at this time and responders will return in the morning with a new plan.

"We felt we've done all we could tonight," he said, adding that responders have been on the scene for more than 10 hours.

Crews first tried to lower a steel plate over an intake to slow the river speed but that was unsuccessful. Then, firefighters had tried to pull the body out but it was too tangled in debris. The cameras being used are not able to capture the full picture in the turbulent water.

"We just can't get a vision to see what may be hanging him up," Czerwinski said. "We're not sure how we're going to be able to pull him back out of it."

A line is tethered to the body for responders to find its location in the morning and police will secure the scene throughout the night. Czerwinski said he hopes to be back on scene by 9 a.m., after a planning meeting to determine the next steps.

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*Update at 8:30 p.m.:* A steel plate has failed to reduce water pressure and responders are developing another plan to retrieve the body.

A lighting system was brought to the scene and installed allowing the responders to work at night. However, it is unclear how long they will stay on scene.

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*Update:* Fire Chief Robert Czerwinski reported at 6 p.m. that the body of a man believed to have drowned in the Housatonic River had been located.

"The victim, we feel, has been located, caught up against a grating in the bottom of the river," he said. "We trying right now to relieve pressure so we can recover that body sometime in the next hour."

Responders used a camera to find the body and were planning to lower a 5 by 8 steel plate by crane onto a vertical intake line upstream in an effort to reduce the pressure in the system so it will release body.

Czerwinski said the work and weather would determine how long it would take.

The sheriff's department was also on the scene, and the fire chief noted that Roto-Rooter and Wahconah Welding had aided in the effort.





"We have tremendous support from the outside helping us in this operation," he said.

The identity of the victim, a man in his late teens or early 20s, has not been confirmed. He reportedly had the nickname "Raccoon."

PITTSFIELD, Mass. — Emergency crews have been working since noontime to recover the body of a swimmer who was believed trapped in the Mill Street dam.

Three people were reportedly swimming in the Housatonic River when a current pulled one of them into a spillway pipe inside of the dam at 11:40 a.m. The body had become trapped inside of that pipe.

"We have a victim who was last seen at the spillway at the end of the Mill Street dam," said Deputy Chief Michael Polidoro on Tuesday afternoon. "We believe he was sucked into the actual spillway and is trapped in that configuration of piping."

The man, reported to be in his late teens or early 20s, was last seen by the two other swimmers at the scene near the spillway. Police were working on identifying him. A woman who was in the water with him said she had been holding onto him but lost her grip, then was able to grab onto a rock.

Emergency responders, including the state police and Pittsfield technical dive teams had arrived at the site but Polidoro said conditions made it difficult to determine where the swimmer was and to get him out.

"We're trying to reduce the flow of the water into that location," he said, adding that the turbulence hampered use of underwater cameras. "It's too hazardous a condition for both city divers or Massachusetts State Police diver to enter because of the hydraulic pressures in the water."

Fire Chief Robert Czerwinski confirmed shortly afterward that the flow of water from the Housatonic, swelled by recent rains, was too fast and heavy to risk using divers.

The swimmer was believed to have been caught up in the turbulence and sucked down into a sluice or pipe and possibly caught on a grating.

Polidoro said the configuration of pipes and sluices in the waters under the dam, which was first built to power the former Eaton Mill, were complicated. Owners of the mill had provided a set of blueprints from the 1930s but they appeared to be incomplete.

"The plans we have do not indicate what type of piping or stone waterways is in there," he said. "We're trying to get equipment in there."

Czerwinski said the responders had thought they would be able to block one sluiceway to lower the water but discovered another one under the river they were looking to block as well.

He said the area was not a regular swimming hole but something of a hangout and party area.

"We've had problems here on occasion, people falling into the water and not being able to swim, but this is the first drowning I can recall," said the chief.

At this point, the operation has switched to recovery but Czerwinski said no body had been located as of 5 p.m. The efforts were going to continue as long as the weather and daylight held out.

"It's a recovery operation, which means everything gets put to a pace where so safety for the responders is the utmost importance," said Polidoro. "To make sure everything is done properly and we don't lose anyone else."

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