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Huge crowd, deep cold cause few problems at Obama inauguration

Good planning finesses what could have been a logistical nightmare

BY JUSTIN HYDE • FREE PRESS WASHINGTON STAFF • JANUARY 21, 2009

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Despite the ticked-off ticket holders, the masses of people kind in spirit but scary in number and the sub-freezing temperatures, Tuesday's inauguration appeared to be the Obama administration's first triumph of central planning.

ADVERTISEMENT Up to 2 million people filled the National Mall from the Capitol to beyond the World War II monument, perhaps the largest crowd ever gathered in the nation's capital. Outside of one accident in a train station -- which had a happy ending -- there were no major problems and few minor ones.

The weather was the most effective form of crowd control. Many of those who arrived in the predawn hours on the Mall snuggled closely together, tucked in sleeping bags, blankets and makeshift windbreaks made from piles of cardboard trash.

"We've tried to assemble five different kinds of huts for added insulation," said Kyle Bailey, 22, a University of Southern California student who arrived on the Mall with seven friends around 11 p.m. Monday. "I wouldn't call it toasty, but it's helped."

Wrappers for hand- and feet-warmers littered the ground, and some in the crowd huddled around inactive vendor stands, just for the chance to warm their hands around the carts' lightbulbs.

A warming station at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum didn't open until 10 a.m. and the concession stands serving hot coffee and hot chocolate didn't open until nearly 8, hours after many arrived at the Mall. Lines for any kind of concession or indoor area stretched a few hundred people in most cases.

Inauguration planners had arranged a series of color-coded tickets and zones walled off with metal barricades to route pedestrians around the area. Downtown was closed to all but bus traffic, and most bridges around the area were closed to everything but buses and pedestrians.

Thousands of people wedged themselves into several crush points, with people surging back and forth less by will than momentum. At the southeast corner of the Capitol, a mass of ticket holders wider than a freeway were stuck tiptoeing toward the ceremony with barely enough room to lift their arms.

Trouble came when closures didn't match either maps or the crowd's idea of where they should be. A few hours before the ceremony, a small crowd gathered at 4th Street behind a barricade, calling on security people to let them cross the Mall.

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DIANE WEISS/Detroit Free Press

After the ceremony, the cold sends thousands of people thronging subway stations. The system was forced to close some stations, lines stretched for blocks and police blocked entrances at some stops to keep the system from overloading. By 4 p.m., the system had carried 806,000 passengers, on course to set a record.

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"Been standing since 4 a.m.," shouted one man.

"We just want to see our president," said another. "At least give us a Jumbotron or something."

A group of 51 Detroit Public Schools students had to walk about an hour and a half to their spot in a congressional office building, after their shuttle bus dropped them on the wrong side of the Capitol.

"All the way it was a monster," said Trevor Coates, a senior at West Side Academy. "I had like five kids I wrapped around trying to get them through the crowd."

Not all stories ended so well. Toby Citrin, a professor for the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan, had tickets to the inauguration but never got to see it.

The four people in his party all had tickets, but two of them, including Citrin, didn't get in because the crowds were too large. Law enforcement grossly underestimated how long it would take to get everyone in, he said.

Citrin still got to hear much of the speech -- some distance away he came upon a car with its radio on and the windows down.

He was luckier than a group of 115 students from the University of Detroit Jesuit High School. After they were dropped off by a shuttle bus near the Capitol at 9:30, it took more than two hours for them to navigate the maze of closed streets and throngs of people to arrive at a watch party arranged by U.S. Rep. John Conyers, D-Detroit, in a House office building -- just as Obama finished his address.

"We missed all of it except the speech," said music director Laura LoDuca.

Washington's Metro train system had few problems during the morning. Trains were slow and occasionally squeezed to capacity. A few passengers learned the hard way that the train doors do not sense obstructions.

The story was different after the ceremony, when the cold sent thousands of people thronging for subway stations. The system was forced to close some stations, lines stretched for blocks and police blocked entrances at some stops to keep the system from overloading. By 4 p.m., the system had carried 806,000 passengers, on course to set a daily record.

And the accident that turned out OK: After a 68-year-old woman fell onto the tracks with a train approaching, a Houston police officer, Elliot Swainson, directed her to lie in a crawlspace under the platform to avoid being struck. The woman was not injured.

Despite the weather and crowds and barriers, many said they would have gone through worse. Cynthia Matthews, a Detroit parent who came with a group of students, said she had been in high school when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated and in college when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot.

Barack Obama's inauguration "is something that I didn't think would ever happen," she said. "I just wish my ancestors could have been here to see this."

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



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