

STORM 'CLOBBERS' AREA'S MIDSECTION

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Hail and high wind zeroed in Thursday afternoon on the city's midsection, damaging hundreds of trees and causing numerous power outages. Forest Park was hard hit. "This has been the most significant damage to hit Forest Park in the eight years I have been here," said Gary Bess, city forestry commissioner. "We will be assessing the damage and replacing as many of the trees as possible the fall planting season." The storm, which hit about 3 p.m. and was gone an hour later, also downed 50-foot trees in neighborhoods north of the park. Just after the storm hit, Bess said, his staff was besieged with about 100 calls reporting downed trees and other damage. Bess said the storm appeared to travel from Skinker Boulevard to Kingshighway and north to Natural Bridge Avenue. "It looked like a big L-shaped swath" through the Central West End, Bess said. After leaving St. Louis, the storm cut across Madison and St. Clair counties, where it caused some damage to trees and power lines, authorities said. No serious injuries were reported. In St. Louis, residents reported that trees had fallen on houses and cars, in driveways and on some major streets blocking traffic. Thomas Dehner, a spokesman for Union Electric Co., said about 30,000 customers, primarily in the central and north ends of the city, experienced power outages. Power to about 20,000 customers had been restored by 10 p.m., he said. "I'm confident we will be into (Friday morning before we get full restoration," Dehner said Thursday evening. John Eise, meteorologist for the National Weather Service, said high humidity, a fast-moving cold front and unstable air contributed to the severity of the storm. Wind gusts of up to 25 mph were reported at Lambert Field, but the wind was much stronger to the south. Eise said that 35 mph winds would snap tree limbs. Eise forecast about a 20 percent chance of rain today. Temperatures are expected to reach 84 by mid-afternoon. In Forest Park, work crews reported that at least 50 trees were felled by the high wind and an additional 50 to 100 trees were damaged. Large tree branches also were seen along Adelaide Avenue on the south end of O'Fallon Park. Bess said about 60 tree trimmers and equipment operators would be clearing streets and alleys most of the night. Cleaning up the damage probably will take about a week or more, he said. The storm caused dozens of min or automobile accidents and downed wires throughout St. Louis County. Lightning struck a house at 2115 Walter Avenue in Vinita Park shortly after 3 p.m., officials reported. The lightning caused no major problem, city officials said. In University City, Police Capt. Robert Fischer said immediately after the storm, "The south end (south of Delmar Boulevard has just been clobbered. Many, many trees and power lines are down." After the storm hit about 3 p.m., the dispatcher was flooded with calls. "We were out of police cars, we were out of fire trucks, we were out of everything," he said. Carolyn Spencer, who lives in the West End, said she was driving west from downtown on Delmar when she saw black clouds moving in from the west. "It was pitch black coming down Delmar for about four minutes before the storm hit. I was flying trying to get into the house," Spencer said as she sat in the hallway of her four-story condominium building at 744 Walton Avenue, one block north of Delmar. "I thought the building was coming down," she said of the minutes during the storm. "I thought the windows were all going to fall out." Leonard Haliburton, owner of HLT Printing Co. in the Central West Plaza building at Euclid Avenue and Delmar, said he was in his car on the building's parking lot when the storm began. "It was sheets of

rain mixed with hail, nice-size hail - so you couldn't see anything. It lasted about 10 minutes - I just stayed in my car," Haliburton said. Police blocked off Euclid at Fountain Park because a tree had apparently been struck by lightning and was burning, police officer Netrea Thomas said. The windows of several cars parked near Euclid and Enright Avenue were broken. The storm and high wind shattered a large window pane at a day-care center at 5654 Delmar. Helen Alston, a supervisor at the Stella Maris Child Center, said the youngsters were lucky to escape serious injury. "I don't see how they didn't get hurt," Alston said. She added that a group of six youngsters, 6 months to a year old, had been playing only a few feet from the window shortly before the storm hit. Cynthia Todd, Joan Bray, Lorraine Kee Montre and Virginia Hick of the Post-Dispatch staff contributed information for this story.

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GRAPHIC: Photo; PHOTO...Ted Dargan/Post-Dispatch...A shade tree lying across an automobile at 7050 Northmoor Drive in Clayton after being felled by Thursday's storm...

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