

Managing County's Long-Term Hurricane Recovery

By Hector Flores

Charlotte County is only five months out from Hurricane Ian devastating wide swaths of the community, but your local government, its residents and business community are making fantastic strides in their recoveries. That said, there is much work to be done. Numerous county facilities, parks, libraries and equipment remain offline as we navigate issues, such as insurance, scopes of work, material delays and more. It will likely be years before we are fully recovered, so we ask for your continued patience as we navigate this unprecedented challenge.

County staff last week met with representatives from multiple state and federal agencies that are part of the Interagency Recovery Coordination group. The IRC provides a strategic and national approach to lead, manage and coordinate recovery efforts while increasing the resilience of communities. The IRC consists of six recovery support functions, each led by a designated federal agency. The functions are economic, housing, health and social services, natural and cultural resources, community planning and capacity building and infrastructure systems. The county is also working with the state Division of Emergency Management to explore grant opportunities to improve the resiliency of our community.

Some of the frustration we're hearing and seeing in communications from residents involves the reopening of facilities, such as sports fields and playgrounds. Our first priority in reopening park facilities is public safety. Until we can be sure playgrounds, fences, backstops, bleachers and other equipment damaged by the hurricane are safe, they will remain closed. Other issues preventing the reopening of sports fields, such as lighting for night games and practices, are part of a massive insurance assessment process. Even when assessment is completed at a facility, there are long lead times to secure replacement equipment needed to complete repairs. To track park reopenings, visit CharlotteCountyFL.gov/ActiveAgain.

Another issue we're all dealing with is increased congestion, especially along our major roadways, such as U.S. 41 and State Road 776. Part of that is our usual seasonal traffic. But another part is the hurricane destroyed many of the vehicle recognition systems that allow our traffic engineers to synchronize signals. Until all of those systems are completely restored, traffic lights must be timed, which can lead to some backups at intersections. The people who are working to make those repairs drive the same roads as we do, so please understand they are working as diligently as possible to get the systems back in operation.

There are numerous facilities that suffered such severe damage. It may be many months or even years before they reopen, if at all. Damage to the Utilities Department administration building at the East Port Environmental Campus forced staff from multiple departments and agencies to relocate immediately to alternate facilities. The Mid-County Library had to be completely emptied to preserve as many materials as possible and allow mitigation work to

occur. We extended library hours at our three other libraries to accommodate our library patrons.

A major focus of our long-term recovery is resiliency, which for facilities means repairing, renovating or rebuilding our assets to be able to better withstand the winds and rainfall associated with tropical systems. Many of our structures built in recent years had that resiliency baked into the design and construction, which is why we were able to reopen them almost immediately, even as minor repairs continue to be made.

There is no magic wand to wave that would get everything back to normal today or tomorrow or even a few months from now. Many of you are experiencing this yourselves as you navigate insurance, finding contractors or wait for supplies. There are thousands of homes with blue roofs still not repaired five months after the storm. Recovery takes time. Patience can wear thin at times, but know that my colleagues and I are working hard every day to shorten the road to recovery and prevent future storms from hurting us so badly.

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