

Successes, remaining challenges six months after Ian

By Hector Flores

It's been just over six months since Hurricane Ian slammed the county with Category 4-force winds and torrential rain. While progress has been made on many fronts, we know there is a long way to go to full recovery. There are still families without permanent shelter, blue roofs dot our neighborhoods and repair timelines are hampered by material delays.

I've been continually impressed and proud of the way our community rallied in the wake of the storm, neighbors helping neighbors, businesses rushing to reopen to provide essential services and people displaying remarkable resiliency in the face of tragedy.

Your county government is experiencing many of the same challenges as its residents. Facilities that suffered severe damage are still closed as we navigate insurance, repair contracts and state and federal recovery processes. We're plugging away at repairing and replacing the more than 80,000 street signs damaged or destroyed by the storm. We're reopening parks, sports fields and recreation facilities as fast as we safely can.

There have been successes, too. The clearing of more than 4.7 million cubic yards of hurricane debris was a herculean task accomplished by my colleagues and our contractor in only four months. Behind the scenes, our financial specialists have been busy ensuring we receive the maximum amount of state and federal response and recovery reimbursements and insurance settlements. Our website and social media channels were lifelines of critical information, garnering millions of views and generating incredible engagement. Our Human Services staff are still working with people seeking assistance with their personal recovery.

Even with that workload, we've already begun the task of long-term recovery, with a focus on improving the county's resiliency. When another storm hits, we need to have stronger structures, more emergency management resources and space and more people available to help our response and recovery efforts. We're engaged with state and federal agencies to secure grants to improve our resiliency.

Time marches on, as always, so the six-month anniversary of Ian also means we're that much closer to the coming hurricane season on June 1. Remember, the early part of the season frequently sees storms spin up in the gulf and strike with little warning.

Hurricane Ian reinforced the importance of readiness. Having a disaster plan is key, including identifying valuable documents and reviewing or buying insurance coverage. Information is critical before and after storms. When power was out and phone and television coverage was limited, we learned the value of alternative sources of information, such as battery-operated radios, person-to-person communication and out-of-town connections with family and friends.

We'll take measures to expand our pre-storm messaging on evacuations, readiness and debris collection processes. We need you to take advantage of tools like Alert Charlotte for emergency messages (www.AlertCharlotte.com), CharCoCares (Text 888-777 to sign up for recovery messages) and disaster planning guides (ready.gov).

We also learned we are stronger together. Recovery takes time, but looking out for each other is what makes a community resilient against anything Mother Nature throws at it. I'm proud to live here and serve our community and I pledge to keep our focus on helping the county emerge from Ian better than before.

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