

Media Release



bluffton
HEART OF THE LOWCOUNTRY

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National Hurricane Preparedness Week is April 30-May 6, 2023
Town of Bluffton prepares for Hurricane Season 2023

As a new Hurricane season begins, Town of Bluffton officials and staff members want residents and business owners to know how to prepare and how to partner with the Town to enhance hurricane preparation and recovery.

The past seven years have tested and strengthened the Town's preparations, policies, and procedures during these weather events. Town staff has prepared checklists below to further educate the public about the lessons learned, critical-incident best practices and areas which the Town needs additional participation to mitigate any further damages and issues which hurricanes can bring.

"Bluffton is very fortunate to have dodged several hurricanes throughout the years, but it is important for residents to prepare for disasters, especially new residents who are experiencing Hurricane season for the first time," Town Manager Stephen Steese said. "Since the impacts of Hurricanes Matthew and Irma, the state overall has learned many lessons, but our area specifically has firsthand experience with property damage and the corresponding impacts to our local economy. It is important that residents plan now for the possibility of a hurricane making landfall in or near our area."

Hurricanes Matthew, Irma, Florence, Dorian, and Michael provided town personnel opportunities to refine and strengthen response plans and procedures for hurricanes and other critical incidents.

"The key to a timely recovery of any weather event is to prepare," Steese said. "Residents should prepare communication and evacuation plans now. They should know where they are going and how they will communicate with friends and loved ones. Residents should also consider that upon return from an evacuation, some essential services may still not be available, so it is critical to make plans for a minimum of 72 hours of food and water, but preferably at least one week."

The checklists below detail several actions every resident and business owner can take to help in the community's overall safety and recovery. **One action item which needs more**

participation is checking every pipe, ditch and storm drain to ensure there are no visible blockages that can result in flooding.

“Every pipe, ditch and storm drain is a part of the stormwater infrastructure and each one needs a set of eyes on it,” Director of Projects & Watershed Resilience Kim Jones said. “Any obstruction can cause a domino effect of flooding and that could result in damage to your house, your street or your property. Every resident is encouraged to help in this effort and ensure any ditch, pipe or drain near his or her property is clear of any obstruction.”

Steese said our storm history has taught the community many lessons and he hopes these lessons better prepare the town to face any future storms or disaster events.

Lessons Learned

- **Ditches:** Town employees inspect and clean out stormwater ditches within the Town’s control however, numerous stormwater ditches are located on private property or are in the jurisdiction of state or county roads. To ensure stormwater can flow unimpeded through the town’s infrastructure, all stormwater ditches need to be maintained and regularly cleaned, especially prior to a storm. This ensures a continuous flow of water and prevents clogged areas from flooding.
- **Social Media:** During a hurricane, Town employees update social media venues almost around the clock to ensure our residents are receiving the most recent, accurate information. Social media is a wonderful tool however, especially during a hurricane, it is difficult to ensure all misinformation from other sources is addressed. Please be mindful to check if the information you are sharing and/or believing is attributed to a reliable source such as state, county or local government agency.
- **Out of State Employers:** Hurricane Florence presented an unusual situation in which South Carolina was evacuated but Georgia was not. In the case that you live in South Carolina and Georgia is where you work, please have conversations with your employer now. Many South Carolina residents voiced they felt conflicted between their work obligations and their personal safety. While this situation is rare, it is best to know your plan and parameters with your employer prior to a storm.
- **South Carolina vs. Georgia Preparations:** Hurricane Florence also caused confusion about information sources. Due to the fact the Lowcountry region is within the Savannah media market, many people said they were confused since Beaufort County was being evacuated, but the Savannah, Georgia region was not. In this case, it is best to tune into your local and county government venues versus television stations. The Savannah area audience is the television station’s primary audience, the Lowcountry audience is secondary therefore, local government agencies will most likely have more complete and specific information for your situation.
- **Patience:** Please be patient. Local, county and state officials’ main job is public safety. Decisions about evacuations, school opening/closings and re-entry are made to benefit the overall good of the community. There are multiple variables to each decision however, the mission is always public safety. Please use patience and understanding when decisions based on overall safety for the entire community may seem inconvenient to your personal situation.

How the Town Prepares

- Requires all Town employees to attend a hurricane preparedness seminar and remind them to prepare now since about half of all Town employees are required to work throughout the storms.
- Coordinates with Beaufort County Emergency Management, Beaufort County School District, and other local and regional agencies to refine hurricane procedures, assign specific tasks and participate in hurricane exercises. This is a year-around, continual process.
- Renews contractor agreements for debris removal and stock inventory of equipment and supplies so the Town is ready to activate at any time during the hurricane season.
- Checks all equipment, vehicles, and prepares staging areas. Purchases or maintains all tools (i.e., chainsaws, generators, etc.) and ensures all employees have prepped with their families since all public works employees report for each storm.
- Checks all Town-maintained drains, inlets, ditches, roads for any blockage and cleaning debris from these areas.
- Trims all dead or loose tree limbs from Town-owned properties and parks.
- Emails all local contractors and property owners associations with hurricane preparedness checklists.

How Your POA Prepares

- The Town emails Property Owners Associations (POA) at the beginning of each hurricane season and prior to a storm to remind property managers of the following:
- Turn off any well water being pumped into man-made lakes and lagoons. This will allow water levels to decrease therefore, increasing their storage capacity.
- Shut off any common area irrigation systems.
- Inspect all storm drains for debris and blockages (i.e., pine needles, leaves, dirt, sediment, or trash) and remove this material.
- Inspect all pipe outfalls to ditches or ponds for blockages and remove any obstructions.
- Confirm arrangements for debris/vegetation removal with a landscaping company or contractor.
- Reduce/pump out water levels in lagoons, if able.
- Please remember, most stormwater drainage infrastructure is privately owned and maintenance of them are the responsibility of the POA.
- Trim dead or overgrown trees and shrubs; these limbs can be potential flying debris.
- Communicate with neighborhood residents to trim dead, loose, or overgrown limbs on their property.

How to Personally Prepare

- The [South Carolina Emergency Management Division Hurricane Guide](https://www.scmd.org/stay-informed/publications/hurricane-guide/) has details about personal plans, zones, emergency shelters and links to other agencies and information. (Link: <https://www.scmd.org/stay-informed/publications/hurricane-guide/>)
- Follow the Town of Bluffton and Bluffton Police Department on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Nextdoor and You Tube.
- Remember the 5 P's: People (Pets), Prescriptions, Paper (i.e., important documents), Personal Needs (i.e., medication, etc.), Priceless Items (i.e., pack your photos albums, etc.) and have a plan for each category.
- Make a paper record of all your contact information for your family and friends in case there is no cell phone service.
- Take photos and/or videos of your property and home before and after the storm for insurance documentation.
- Secure any loose articles (i.e., outdoor furniture, potted plants, or décor items) on your property that have the potential to become airborne and cause damage, or block pipes or ditches.
- Know your evacuation options and pre-plan possible routes and hotels or housing arrangements.
- If you own a pet, know which hotels accept pets during a hurricane.
- Have a two-week supply of medications before you travel.
- Conduct inspections of drainage features around your house and property including gutters and remove any blockages.
- Turn off irrigation systems.
- Remove items which may hold water to deter mosquito breeding after the storm passes.
- Review your insurance policies and declarations to ensure you know what is and what is not covered by your insurance company.
- Obtain flood insurance now. Most homeowner insurance policies do not cover flooding. The federal government administers flood insurance. More information is available at the National Flood Insurance Program at www.floodsmart.gov. It is predicted more than 75 % of Beaufort County will have the potential to flood with a Category 1 Hurricane. Please be mindful you live in the Lowcountry; therefore, the entire region is flat and flood prone.
- Best advice: Leave PRIOR to an evacuation order. You can better control your destination and route. Once an evacuation order is called, SC Highway Patrol officers and local officers will direct your path of travel which is liable to add to frustration and longer travel time.
- Remember if you decide to stay during an evacuation order, emergency services may be suspended due to unsafe weather conditions. Mandatory evacuation orders are issued to save the lives of residents as well as first responders. If you choose to ignore the mandatory evacuation order, be prepared to be self-sufficient during, and for the first 72 hours after, a storm. High winds during storms prohibit travel of emergency response vehicles and debris following storms may also prevent travel. In addition, mandatory evacuations also include closure of hospital facilities. This means medical care is unavailable until after evacuation orders are lifted.

- Please be patient and help your neighbor. The Town is working around the clock to manage the storm however, everyone has a role in the community's safety and recovery.

How Developers/Contractors Prepare

- The Town of Bluffton emails local contractors to remind them of the following:
- Take preventative action to ensure all active construction sites are free of equipment, materials, and debris.
- All temporary fences and sediment and erosion control devices are properly installed and maintained to avoid dirt leaving site and roadway flooding is prevented.

Hurricane Season Reminders

- The Hurricane Season begins June 1 and ends November 30. Historically, the Lowcountry has hurricanes or effects from hurricanes from late August through October.
- The Governor of South Carolina is the only one who can declare an evacuation order. Your local county and municipal officials are following the Governor's directive.
- Beaufort County Emergency Management (under the direction of the Beaufort County Sheriff's Office) is the lead agency for all of Beaufort County. Its representatives decide re-entry routes and times. The Town of Bluffton follows the directives of Beaufort County Emergency Management during a hurricane or critical incident.
- There are NO shelters available in Beaufort County during a hurricane. The Red Cross has opened some shelters in Jasper County during storm events. Please call the local Red Cross for further information.
- If you need transportation to a shelter prior to a storm, please call the Palmetto Breeze, the Lowcountry's public transportation system at 843.757.5782.
- The Town of Bluffton website: <https://www.townofbluffton.sc.gov/>.
- The SC Emergency Division Management's website: <https://hurricane.sc/>.

Note: If an organization would like to have a hurricane preparation presentation, please contact Public Information Officer Debbie Szpanka at (Email): dszpanka@townofbluffton.com.

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