

Listserv

Hello from the Land of Hurricanes

By: Brad Cunningham, City Attorney, Lexington, South Carolina

As fall rolled into place here in the Carolinas, two seasons made their annual appearance on the radar. First and foremost, on the minds of most of us was the beginning in earnest of the 2018 college football season. After all, there are priorities aren't there?

And, while college football is touched upon on the listserve slightly, it is usually discussed more upon the IMLA Water Cooler. The other season that has crept upon us was discussed much more on the listserve. If you haven't realized by now, I'm talking about hurricane season. It starts June 1, but peaks in September. Our reward in 2018 was a visit from Hurricane Florence.

Having lived in the Carolinas my entire life, and being an old beach bum at heart, I likely qualify as a hurricane veteran. I have seen them come and go and witnessed the first-hand effect they have on cities and their residents.

And right off the top, let me answer the first question everyone usually asks me? How can you live there with the threat of hurricanes? The initial and simple answer for this old beach bum is "It's worth it." Besides, unlike some natural disasters, you at least have a sporting chance with a hurricane. It sends a telegram ahead of time and says "Hey – I might be dropping in at your place in a few days, so you might want to start to prepare." Not so with tornadoes, earthquakes or even severe thunderstorms. With those, you have little or even no advance notice at all. But, even with advance notice, evacuation is not a fun chore. But, hey, we are old pros at it.

The media coverage of Hurricane Florence was incredible. About a week ahead of time, our Governors Cooper (North Carolina) and McMaster (South Carolina) declared states of emergency. The national guard was activated, schools were closed, emergency supplies were made available and interstate lanes were reversed. This was a needed step and was taken well ahead of time. It stirred raids on the gas stations, grocery stores and hardware stores. Residents grabbed all the batteries, bottled water, tape, bread and other necessaries they could find.

At my daughter's college, classes were canceled for an entire week. Sandbags and portable toilets were brought in by the truckload. Yes, portable toilets... stacked in a line of 24 out in front of the dorm for two weeks. Little did we know at the time, but these proved to be perfectly useless. Students were also given the option to go home. But, living in the international community, my daughter's dorm was full of foreign students who had never experienced a hurricane.

Once all the emergency preparations were made, the most difficult portion of the process took place. Waiting... and waiting... and waiting some more. As she neared the coast, Florence was moving at speeds between 3 to 5 miles per hour. The first four days of the "emergency" were gorgeous weather-wise. Students spent their severe weather days swimming and laying in the sun, swimming in their pools, and binge watching I Carly reruns. Local pizza delivery places were inundated with orders.

Here in Lexington, by Friday a slight "mist" moved in and it stayed wet all day even though it did not rain hard enough for an umbrella most of the time. "Zero Hour" was expected to be Saturday morning... then adjusted to Saturday afternoon... then Saturday evening...then Sunday morning... After making landfall just above Wrightsville Beach, NC, Florence began creeping toward us at the startling pace of 2 miles per hour. A friend in Myrtle Beach correctly pointed out that he could have evacuated on foot and stayed ahead of the storm. Truly, that is how slow it was moving.

We waited and waited and finally Saturday evening came the announcement – our Hurricane and Tropical Storm Warnings were dropped. No watches were even in place. Florence had simply lost her steam once she moved this far inland because she was moving too slowly. Yes, here in Lexington we were very fortunate.

Such was not the case for folks in Southeastern North Carolina and Northeastern South Carolina. Rain came and kept coming. Record amounts of rainfall fell in many locations. Municipal resources were taxed in helping flood victims. Worse yet, for those in some places, they had as much as two weeks until the rivers in their area "crested." So, while they "dodged" the hurricane, they certainly did not stay free from its effects. It may have "hit" further north, but flooding lasted for quite some time as the waters made their way in a southerly direction toward the coast. So, we learned it is not "over" once the hurricane moves on. Indeed, the danger can last for quite some time afterward.

Schools in most areas have finally returned to session this week. This was an amazing storm. It served as a great reminder for many of us as to what resources were taxed by municipalities. Here in Lexington, like other places, our police were on extra duty. This caused overtime pay. Such was also the case in our Utilities Department, Transportation Department and Parks Department. (trees were damaged). Overtime and the effect on the payroll was one often

overlooked cost of hurricane experience. How can you budget for this accurately?

Other things we learned: Gas lines formed way ahead of time. Laws are not the same in every state, and I had a report from a friend in Georgia that his local station was selling regular unleaded gas for nearly six dollars a gallon. And this was in a place that never received a Storm Warning!

Hotels were booked as folks fled inland. Many found there to be no room at the inn. Those who found rooms were disappointed at the number of rooms that refused to take pets. Another lesson... Hotels, shelters and evacuation centers most of the time do not accept pets. This led several folks, like my Aunt Cyndi and Uncle Fred, to stay home in Coastal North Carolina when they might have been better served to evacuate. But, with no place to take several pets they decided to hunker down with their dogs. (No, they are not Georgia fans)

Evacuation of hospitals and nursing homes proved to be quite a challenge for some hard-hit areas. My thoughts were with my childhood friend Dr. Chris Cosgrove, who lives near ground zero in Wilmington, NC. "Where do his patients go? I guess he can't leave if he has critical patients in the hospital. Wow, what a situation to be in," I thought. Unfortunately, I heard a few patients died of heart attacks or other complications during the process.

I digress to the news coverage of this tragic event. It was constant and widespread. My daughter received a text from her friend in Germany. It contained a picture of the front page of her local (small town) newspaper. Florence was the lead story. I received phone calls, text messages and emails from places including but not limited to Montana, California, Washington, Kansas, Missouri, Texas, Arizona, Japan, Germany, France and even our IMLA buddy Dan Best in Australia. This thing was publicized all over the world! I heard from people I hadn't talked to in twenty years.

Yet another lesson learned was to pay attention to the ACTUAL track of the storm as well as the FORECAST track... With the TV on in the clerk's office all week, I noticed weather stations sticking to the forecast track. Being the hurricane veteran, I am, I was plotting the coordinates manually myself for quite some time. When the forecast track took a turn to the south, the media outlets and folks in South Carolina began to get more nervous. But, I noticed in the actual track that it had indeed not turned south but had turned in a more northerly direction.

The broadcast of the "turn south" continued long enough to where I emailed the National Weather Service which was fielding questions. My question was this: "For a whole day days now we have been hearing about this turn to the south. But the coordinates show it has gone in direction from moving "W" to "WNW" to now NW. How is that a turn to the south?" They professed that the storm was not doing what it was predicted to do.

Wow, I thought. Wouldn't it be better if they reported what it was *doing* instead of what they thought it was going to do? Certainly they need to look at the forecast, but we need both don't we? That was another lesson – both the actual track and the forecast track are important, but make sure you know which one you are hearing.

Folks, yes, these hurricanes are serious business. The overarching concern is take it seriously, and keep informed. Pay attention to local authorities, and stay clear of high water and danger areas. Also, please watch the news, but remember to take it for what it is.

I'm in no way trying to diminish the seriousness of the issues here. Please understand that. But, sometimes the news doesn't get the whole story or leads you to make conclusions that may not be so dependable. A cousin in Wilmington reports that a news outlet was using a sprinkler to make fake rain during a newscast.

Another news outlet showed a weather reporter struggling to stand while young folks walked with little difficulty in the background. Countless times I have seen a weather reporter standing with some difficulty while folks strolled the beach in the background like they didn't have a care in the world.

Sure, the weather reporters are providing a valuable service by bringing us the news ahead of time so we can prepare. No question about that. But, be honest here, does exaggeration help anyone? I'm concerned about the "crying wolf" effect, and that the more this happens the more people may find the news sources not credible. And, then this could cause them to stay behind next time when it might otherwise not be a good idea. Isn't honesty best?

I close by saying I really feel for those in the floodwaters of Florence and its aftermath. Mosquito borne diseases have become a concern, and resources have been taxed. A giant hug and pat on the back would be welcome form the rest of the country. Thanks for sending the resources, and we will be glad to repay you someday. Let's hope we don't have to, but we will if needed.

A small bit of humor related to the hurricane saga. It is generally well known that the Weather Channel sends Jim Cantore to where ground zero is expected to be for bad weather. He does a great job. But, check that channel and Internet for commercials and videos publicizing this in a humorous way.

Poor Jim is seen taking his family on a vacation. He plops down his beach chair and lays back. Seeing him, the rest of the folks flee in panic expecting a storm to come. This leaves Jim alone on the beach. In another video, he tries to check into a hotel but can't because all the employees vanish when he shows up there. Comical, and a much-needed relief at this time.

The prosecution rests, your honor...

