

Help available for residents impacted by hurricanes

By Hector Flores

Hurricanes Helene and Milton caused widespread damage across the county, as unprecedented storm surge inundated homes with water and sand and destroyed infrastructure. Recovery will take years for many of those impacted. My pledge to all is that my colleagues and I and our state and federal partners will be ready to help in any way we can.

The Community Development Department has opened a pop-up permitting site at the Mac V. Horton West County Annex, located at 6868 San Casa Drive in Englewood to assist homeowners and contractors with residential storm-related permits.

Debris collection has already begun. As of noon Wednesday, our debris contractor has picked up nearly 30,000 cubic yards of debris, enough to fill 1-1/2 footballs field 10 feet high. To learn how to separate storm debris, visit www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov and click the Hurricane Milton button at the top of the page. A debris collection dashboard and map let you track debris collection progress. To view the dashboard with totals, visit www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov/debris and to view the map of collection progress visit www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov/debrisprogress.

Late Utilities Department fees have been suspended until Jan. 1, 2025. Currently, customers may have a once-a-year adjustment due to high usage. Due to the hurricanes, we are offering a second adjustment to customers until Dec. 31, 2024. For customers whose homes were destroyed, contact the department at 941-764-4300 to discuss your options.

The county understands residents are anxious to use our parks, beaches and boat ramps. Many facilities are already back open, but others are being used for recovery services or are unsafe. We will work as quickly as possible with our contractors to get our facilities back to normal. To view a list of openings and closures, visit www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov/activeagain.

A Federal Emergency Management Agency disaster recovery center has already opened at the South County Regional Park Recreation Center, located at 670 Cooper St., in Punta Gorda. The DRC will be open 7 a.m.-7 p.m., seven days a week.

Disaster recovery centers provide disaster survivors with information from Florida agencies, FEMA, and the U.S. Small Business Administration. Individuals can get help applying for federal assistance and disaster loans, update applications and learn about other resources available.

Individuals affected by Hurricane Milton in Florida can also apply for assistance online or by phone:

- www.DisasterAssistance.gov
- call the FEMA Helpline 1-800-621-3362, 7 a.m.-10 p.m., seven days a week. Help is available in many languages.

Charlotte County businesses and residents whose employment or self-employment was lost or interrupted as a direct result of Hurricane Milton and are not eligible for regular state or federal Reemployment Assistance benefits can apply for Disaster Unemployment Assistance. Florida Commerce is accepting applications from eligible residents whose employment or self-employment was lost or interrupted due to Hurricane Milton are encouraged to submit a claim at FloridaJobs.org.

To file a claim, go to www.FloridaJobs.org and select "File a Claim," visit a local CareerSource Career Center, or call 1-800-385-3920. Customer service representatives are available from 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

There are additional resources available I can't fit in this space, including a shelter, comfort stations, sand drop-off locations, a damage assessment survey and more on the storm recovery webpage at www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov/storm. I will continue to provide updates and information as it becomes available.

I'm so proud of the efforts of my colleagues as we confront these back-to-back storms. I can assure you that work will continue on your behalf as long as needed. Be well and stay resilient.

Readers may reach County Administrator Hector Flores at Hector.Flores@CharlotteCountyFL.gov.