Anniversaries are a time of reflection and celebration. In our personal lives, they mark milestones in our marriages or careers. Yesterday’s 15th anniversary of the day Hurricane Charley made a direct hit on Charlotte County is one we would rather not acknowledge, never mind remember.

The hurricane not only wrecked homes and ruined lives, it marked the start of further misfortune. Home prices soared, igniting a housing bubble that left many families with no place to live. That was followed by the bursting of that bubble, which led to an unprecedented number of foreclosures, massive layoffs (including hundreds of county employees) and a financial crisis that became known as the Great Recession.

It was personally painful for me to see so many of my colleagues impacted by Charley and the post-Charley recession. Now many years removed from that experience, I’m also struck by the remarkable resilience demonstrated by my peers and the people of Charlotte County. People repaired or rebuilt the thousands of homes and businesses damaged or destroyed by the hurricane. Our institutions stepped up, too. The school district rebuilt six schools and repaired the rest. The county repaired dozens of facilities at a cost of tens of millions of dollars and cleared tons of debris strewn across the county.

Fifteen years after Hurricane Charley finds Charlotte County in a period of positive change, with strong economic development happening across the county. Babcock Ranch, which shrugged off a brush with Hurricane Irma in 2017, is making great progress and making news around the world as the nation’s first solar-powered city. Murdock Village on Monday passed its own milestone, with a check-presentation ceremony marking Private Equity Group’s purchase of 452 acres and the beginning of the development phase. New businesses are opening along our commercial corridors and new homes are being built in subdivisions and infill areas. Victims of the economic downturn are getting new names and new lives, such as Heritage Landing at the site of the former Tern Bay off Burnt Store Road. Work is underway on Sunseeker Resort in Charlotte Harbor, which will trigger the transformation of the county’s oldest community.

These 15 years have also seen the county’s own facilities transformed. We developed three regional parks, two of which now have new recreation centers. New splash pads at a pair of parks have won rave reviews and a new library in Punta Gorda is set to open in two weeks. Widened roads, like Edgewater Drive, Gasparilla Road, Burnt Store Road and Midway Boulevard, and new ones, such as Piper Road next to the Punta Gorda Airport, have improved traffic flow and enhanced motorist safety.

We’re also better prepared today for whatever may come. Whereas Hurricane Charley heavily damaged our vulnerable emergency management office, even as staff were plotting its course, we now have an emergency operations center that can withstand a Category 5 hurricane and operate off the grid indefinitely after a storm. In fact, staff and volunteers from our Community Emergency Response Team will be conducting a training session on Friday at the EOC.
After Hurricane Irma, we identified more than four dozen ways to improve our readiness and response. We installed lift station generators to ensure wastewater treatment is not interrupted by a power outage. We’re expanding storage capacity to ensure our emergency vehicles and recovery equipment have the fuel needed to carry out missions. We designated more staff as essential to allow county operations to resume as soon as possible after an emergency and trained more than 120 additional employees to work through a storm and its aftermath in shelters and our emergency call center.

Our people are better prepared and informed, too. Public response to preparedness outreach and information has exceeded expectations and we have developed new ways to reach residents, such as social media and a phone, text and email alert system. (Visit AlertCharlotte.com to sign up if you haven’t already.)

A heartening symbol of the county’s recovery and progress since Hurricane Charley was our community’s response to the needs generated by hurricanes Ivan and Michael. Trucks loaded with supplies helped repay part of our debt for the generosity and kindness we experienced after Charley. Nearly two dozen county employees deployed to disaster zones to help communities get back on their feet.

Anyone who lived through Charley has their own memories of the storm and its impact. Some left and never returned. Some succumbed to the experience, but were never counted in official tallies. Our progress doesn’t diminish their suffering or loss.

Looking back today, I’m proud of how our community weathered Hurricane Charley, impressed by the resilience of our people and our institutions and optimistic about our future.

**Toastmasters award**

The CC Gov Toastmasters club founded in April 2017 was named Toastmasters International District 48, Division F Club of the Year. CC Gov Toastmasters also received the organization’s President’s Distinguished Club Award. The county club, which has 27 members, is the youngest of the 20 clubs in Division F.

“Our Toastmasters club is open to any county employee who wants to develop their public speaking and leadership skills. I’m proud of the way our members help each other to grow personally and professionally and appreciate the county leadership’s support of our efforts. This award recognizes the commitment our members have shown to not only building our individual skills, but to creating a culture of continuous improvement among our members,” said CC Gov Toastmasters Immediate Past President Elizabeth Tracy, program manager for the county’s government access television station, CC-TV. “I want to thank the many Toastmasters from other clubs in the area who gave so much time and energy helping us to launch and grow CC Gov Toastmasters.”

Toastmasters International is a non-profit educational organization that teaches public speaking and leadership skills through a worldwide network of clubs. The organization has 357,000 members in more than 16,600 clubs in 143 countries.

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