

Reflecting on a year of resilience and recovery

By Hector Flores

The approaching new year always puts me in a reflective mindset. Typically, I look back at the accomplishments of my team serving our community by implementing new policies, operating facilities and running programs. This year was defined by a different kind of service as we prepared for and responded to two historic hurricanes in just two weeks.

The county has seen its share of storms, but none delivered the level of storm surge we saw from hurricanes Helene and Milton. Hundreds of residents lost their homes, and even more had to discard belongings soaked by stormwater. As of Wednesday, our debris contractor had collected nearly 285,000 cubic yards of debris.

My colleagues are still working on recovery, hosting disaster assistance teams, distributing information, overseeing debris and sand removal from the mainland and barrier islands, managing facility damage repairs and filing Federal Emergency Management Agency reimbursement documents and insurance claims. There are many more months of work to be done.

I was particularly impressed by the team's resilience in the face of back-to-back storms. We had only just begun implementing a new emergency duty policy that increased the number of staff assigned to roles in storm readiness and response, including staffing the call center, operating shelters, driving Transit vans and more.

Speaking of Transit, the county's door-to-door public transportation service was on full display throughout the storms, delivering riders to shelters, helping evacuate assisted living facility residents and providing rides to and from disaster recovery centers. We want to take advantage of the rise in Transit's visibility to increase ridership throughout the year. We've just recently launched a phone app to make it easier to sign up for a ride, implemented same day reservations and we'll be developing a more robust marketing plan soon.

Numerous recovery missions are still underway, including the removal and sifting of hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of sand on the barrier islands for eventual replacement on the beaches. At Port Charlotte Beach Park, one contractor is conducting a waterway debris removal operation and another one is prepping for the demolition of the recreation center and pool for eventual replacement.

At a workshop on Tuesday, the commission was briefed on our plan to reopen parts of the park for public use in mid-February, including the playground, tennis and basketball courts and one of the boat ramps. At the briefing, the board learned the damage to the park was about \$20 million, including the fishing pier, boardwalks, sidewalk, pavilions, bocce court and the boat dock. Our board and staff stand with our community in wanting to expedite reopening of this community asset.

Last month the board approved a change in the building regulations on Manasota and Sandpiper keys to enable homeowners to repair and replace homes damaged by the storm surge.

I want to express my appreciation of residents' patience as we restore access to facilities still closed for repairs. I know many anglers are and will be missing the numerous piers that were damaged or destroyed. We will be working diligently to perform assessments, prepare replacement designs and rebuild as soon as possible.

I'll close by wishing everyone a happy and healthy holiday season and a bright and hopeful new year.

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