

Hurricane season requires awareness and preparedness

By Patrick Fuller

As Southwest Florida enters the 2026 Atlantic hurricane season, now is the time for Charlotte County residents to prepare.

Every year, seasonal forecasts generate significant attention. Some predictions call for active seasons, others indicate a less active season. While those outlooks are useful for awareness, they should never determine how you prepare. It only takes one storm impacting our community to change lives and our community.

Former FEMA Administrator and former Florida Division of Emergency Management Director Craig Fugate said it best: "Prepare for the storm, not the season."

Most of us know the long history of storms in Charlotte County. Hurricane Charley in 2004 was a fast-moving Category 4 storm that devastated Punta Gorda and Port Charlotte with extreme wind damage. Hurricane Irma in 2017 produced widespread flooding and prolonged power outages despite making landfall elsewhere in Florida. Hurricane Ian in 2022 reminded all of Southwest Florida of the destructive power of storm surge, flooding, and damaging winds.

More recently, hurricanes Helene and Milton reinforced the reality that storm surge remains one of the greatest threats facing Charlotte County. Even storms making landfall well away from our area can push significant water into Charlotte Harbor, tidal waterways, canals, and low-lying coastal communities. These storms demonstrated that water can be the most dangerous and disruptive aspect of a hurricane event.

Every storm is different. Size, track, rainfall, surge, tornadoes, and forward speed all influence impacts. A less active forecast does not reduce the risk to our community. In fact, rapid intensification in the gulf continues to be one of the greatest concerns for emergency managers across Florida, leaving less time for residents to make last-minute decisions.

Preparedness should begin long before a tropical system forms, and it starts with four simple but critical steps.

First, understand your risk.

Know your evacuation zone. Know your flood risk. Know how your home was built and how it may perform during hurricane conditions. Storm surge remains one of the deadliest hurricane hazards in coastal communities, and evacuation decisions are driven by storm surge risk — not simply storm category.

Charlotte County's "Know Your Zone" resources help residents identify evacuation zones and better understand their vulnerability before a storm threatens the area. Understanding your risk allows you to make informed decisions early instead of reacting under pressure. You can find your evacuation zone by visiting CharlotteCountyFL.gov/KnowYourZone or by finding the color-coded collar on the stop sign closest to your home.

Second, make a plan.

Every household should discuss where they would go if evacuations are ordered, how family members will communicate, and what arrangements may be needed for pets, medical needs, or elderly relatives.

Third, build a kit.

Following a major hurricane, residents may need to be self-sufficient for several days. Power outages, supply shortages, fuel disruptions, and limited access to services are common after storms.

Your disaster kit should include water, nonperishable food, medications, flashlights, batteries, charging devices, important documents, cash, and supplies tailored to your household's specific needs.

Finally, stay informed.

Reliable information saves lives during disasters. Residents should monitor trusted local media, official Charlotte County Emergency Management communications, and weather updates throughout hurricane season.

Alert Charlotte remains one of the most important preparedness tools available to residents. The system provides emergency notifications directly by phone, text, and email, including evacuation notices, severe weather alerts, and critical emergency information.

One of the defining characteristics of Charlotte County has always been neighbors helping neighbors before, during, and after disasters. A great resource to assist with your preparedness journey is the Charlotte County Disaster Guide (CharlotteCountyFL.gov/disasterguide). Minimize the stress of hurricanes by doing everything you can now to enhance your resiliency, not when we are facing down a storm.

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