

# HURRICANE IAN - One Year Later

## Hurricane Ian facts

- To date, Lee County has received more than \$1.1 billion in hurricane funding from the federal government
- While Gasparilla Island had three homes completely destroyed (to this date, on record) Lee County south of us was the hardest hit in the state. After Ian brought a 15-foot storm surge to Fort Myers beach, they lost 5,076 private residences and 284 businesses, with 910 businesses experiencing major damage.
- 6.3 million cubic yards of debris was removed just in unincorporated areas

of Lee County, like Boca Grande.

- Countywide, the damage from Ian is estimated to be \$112 billion.
- By the end of 2022, the Boca Grande Woman's Club hurricane relief fund had processed more than 500 applications and serviced 480. The fund held more than \$1 million donated by approximately 230 private donors. The Boca Grande Disaster Relief Fund received donations of



\$2.4 million, distributed \$2.2 million and

has a standing balance allocated for special community projects currently in process.

- South Beach Bar & Grille (shown here right after the storm and now), exploded during the storm due to a natural gas line rupture and continued to burn for almost two days. It is currently being rebuilt.

- Just after the storm, the water at the north end – from the base of the south bridge out past the county line – was 32 inches high.

The Boca Beacon put out two newspapers in the week after Ian with only a back-up generator – no internet or phones. Our publisher put the paper on a thumb drive and took it to the printer. We continued to produce newspapers every week after.

## Ian

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number of units that had new foam insulation seemed to hold up better; residents voted a second \$3,000 assessment.

New hurricane straps were part of the revamp. Individually 75 of 84 owners elected to install sturdier doors. One roadblock in hurricane reconstruction is permitting. Grogan said that Charlotte County had done the best they could.

"It would be impossible for any jurisdiction to pull this off painlessly," said Grogan.

Boca Grande North, like other complexes, has residents who are eager to return.

"I was surprised that the building took a beating and survived," said Kenny Burnette, who with his wife Barbara had just renovated a unit at Boca Grande North before the storm. "I thought there would be wood floating out in the Gulf."

As the exterior of the project is still not complete, they have yet to be able to begin work on the interior. Condo management's responsibility is to bring the building back to an unpainted wall, and the owner is responsible for the rest.

Like so many homeowners across Florida, Burnette said that the insurance situation for the interior has been a "complete disaster." Initially his insurer offered just 10 percent of their claim.

"It's incomprehensible the way they are coddled by Tallahassee," said Burnette. "The insurance industry has just been hell to deal with."

### Sense of 'Normalcy'

The Boca Grande Club had their

food operations up and going in October, which provided some sense of normalcy.

Even as the hurricane was a Category 5 (upgraded by NOAA after the storm), members did not expect to see such damage.

"A number of the people who returned to Boca after Ian were surprised at how severely Ian had hit," said Yvonne Anderson, the club's president and CEO. Anderson decamped to Sarasota for the duration of the storm and came back the next day to survey the destruction. Like so many during any natural disaster, the people working on the recovery often have personal damage to deal with. In Anderson's case it was ceilings and balcony.

Club member MacKay Boyer, whose Palm Island Resort landside marina condo was hit hard by Ian, was happy to have been able to use the dining room in the fall after the storm when she came down with her husband Eric to survey and fix damage. She said that the full extent of the damage wasn't readily apparent until she saw the resort from its Gulf of Mexico side.

By March of this year, Eric Boyer was even able to attend a tennis clinic.

"When I was on the beach, I looked back at the club and could see all the damage to the roofs," said Boyer.

The rebuilding challenge has not just been finding the right materials and getting permits, but also locating someone to do the work.

"The biggest problem our contractors are all facing is a lack of labor," said Anderson.

Still unfinished is the Marina side of the Boca Grande Club, which is to the left as you go onto Gasparilla Island.



■ Kappy's took care of workers by serving free food, all the while dealing with damage at the store.

They are still working on restoring one of the buildings there. Other amenities have had to wait; a playground was completely destroyed.

Anderson is hopeful that most of the work at Boca Grande Club will be finished up by October 31, and will include a full tennis program. The club will open for full dining on Oct. 12.

### Counting the Cost

Kappy's Market was hit hard by the storm, not so much physically, but economically. With the destruction of Boca Grande North, Sea Oats and Dunes of Boca Grande, many of their residents have not been able to return, or were in different locations. These seasonal and full-time residents were customers not only of the grocery goods at the store, but renters of carts as well. In comparison to other areas on the island, the streets are empty.

"Every time I drive on the island I see fences and cars and no people," said Kaplan. "I fear that it is going to be another year."

That there are workers at the condo complexes is encouraging, but the economy won't fully be back until all the residents get situated in their own houses.

Kappy's was essential in the recovery on the north end of the island, as

their staff provided the hands-on staff for food and free lunches for recovery workers. In turn the community, including the Boca Grande Woman's Club and in particular the Boca Grande Lighthouse Methodist Church and other churches did their best to help out.

"Kudos to the Methodist Church that helped us get through that time period," said Kaplan, who rode out the hurricane just across the causeway just off Placida Road Coral Cay. While he suffered minor damage to most, he was surprised at the destruction of his neighbors.

One challenge is that many residents on the island, while not poor, have their Gasparilla Island residence as their first and only home, not to mention limited resources.

Kaplan, reflected on the fact that there is a bit of community PTSD about the whole event. "There's two kinds of damage," said Kaplan, "physical damage, and economic damage."

Kappa's Manager Anna Goodwin is appreciative of how Kaplan was able to keep the staff on, and proud of the way they in turn were able to assist in the recovery by helping service workers trying to put the island back together. This sort of effort could only have happened with a locally owned business, and a nearby owner.

Because of the extreme drop in business, they have refocused the product mix; they are now a one-stop for carts, comestibles and gifts. Kaplan speaks for all the local island merchants when he says that they still need the community's support, as realistically, he and his neighbors are still a good year or so away from economic recovery.

"We've done our best to physically recover," said Kaplan.

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