

# HURRICANE IAN - One Year Later

## Contractors still divining solutions at south end properties

■ BY GARLAND POLLARD

Each year, David and Karen Watts come to Boca Grande from their home near Manchester, England. This year, knowing that their yearly visit from Britain's Midlands would be after Hurricane Ian, they were offered an out.

"They said, 'If you want to cancel.....'", said David Watts.

On this one-year anniversary week of the arrival of Hurricane Ian, the Watts were happily unpacking a grocery haul from Publix in their neatly restored Gulf Dunes rental.

They were prepared to come back to a very different island from the one they last saw in July of 2022. When they got here, the only problem was that their rental was too close to another condo repair project. They were quickly offered a new location.

"All we could hear was bang, bang, bang, bang," said David Watts.

As regulars to Gasparilla Island, the Watts have visited each year for the last three decades, and they've stayed in different places. They recall that the island seems better today than after their post-Hurricane Charley visit.



In fact, the only big thing different this year was that a friend from Lakeland usually joins them, but this year he was so busy with his HVAC customers' repairs that he was unable to be here.

The whole process of getting to recovery, when there are only final details and repairs, has been slow at some of the condo complexes on the southern end of the island.

"It was a fight from the get go," said Dave Davis, who this week was working on a unit at the Lighthouse condos, near the Range Light. He has been working on repair projects since the hurricane, and the hardest part for him is finding people to do the work.

"It's 100 percent by myself," said Davis.

For a drywall project, he says he was lucky to find some "guys out of Lutz" to do the work. Part of the lure was the island itself. The drywall installers happened to be "metal detector people" and spent their off time searching the beaches for Gasparilla treasures.

They did not find doubloons, but they did find 86 cents. The coins were pre-1964, which added a slight bit of interest, Davis said.

The northernmost Lighthouse condos, like so many locations, "took the brunt" of the storm, and perhaps protected the other units. At least four units are now down to pads and 6 x 6 pilings. The once familiar, hand-painted, Lighthouse sign is still down, too.

A key part of the recovery has been real estate firms and the agencies that help with maintenance. Joe Wojcik of Gasparilla Home Watch was checking on a property north of the Sundown Colony condos this week around Lafitte and Gulf.

"It was pretty intense," said Wojcik of the storm, which echoed the feeling of many who reported peak gusts up to 200 mph on home anemometers. The storm was even rough in Englewood, he said.

In addition to the obvious frustrations of helping homeowners waiting on insurance claims, there were surprises. He said that in the haste of people leaving, people forgot things.

Among the worst? "Clearing out refrigerators with rotten food," said Wojcik.

In the weeks after the storm, and other than the maggots, glass and

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