

HURRICANE IAN - One Year Later

The definitive difference between Irma and Ian responses

And how much more we have to talk about

■ BY MARCY SHORTUSE

There is still far too long a tale to be told about what has happened to this island in the year following Hurricane Ian. For instance, a year hasn't been anywhere near long enough to get a complete total on all of the island's damage. We might try again in two years' time, but you can imagine by looking at the photos that the costs just on the island will reach sky high.

We have still yet to talk to people like Kim Newlin, who owns Newlin's Mainly Gourmet on 4th Street, whose business was probably the worst hit downtown ... next to the bakery, of course.

We still have to talk to stores like Palm on Park, the churches, the GICIA, the Gasparilla Island Water Association and many more. We will be reaching out in the next few weeks to many more people, so you'll be seeing their stories here soon.

One thing that stood out to many people was the difference in the responses that county officials had between Hurricane Irma (2017) and Ian. There were many EOC meetings for Lee County, in coordination with the Boca Grande EOC, in the days leading up to Irma. For Ian, there was

none. Fire Chief C.W. Blosser said his contact with the Lee County EOC included just a few short conference calls.

For Ian, it seemed like a "wait-and-see" approach was taken until the day before the storm hit, even though the storm was already very large, very strong and many weather models had it making landfall near our area.

Would it have made a difference to have had more county-wide contact and a more aggressive approach to urge residents to leave? It might have, but we also know that every evacuation comes with high costs and, quite often, with much chaos. People are angry if a storm is hyped too much, as well as angry if a storm is taken lightly.

We know now, after Ian, it took Lee County officials almost three weeks after the storm to get a good picture of what was going on here. It took even longer for them to understand the scope of debris that was in piles everywhere, along every street and in every vacant lot.

We were on our own for quite a bit of Ian, which is why residents and island officials are creating our own communications system that doesn't require internet or cell service. With every situation like Ian there is a lot to



be learned. And learn we did.

We learned that insurance companies don't have to follow any rules, even though we pay them all year round in the event something like Hurricane Ian happens.

We learned that there are individuals on this island that can change the world ... at least our little world ... by making the right phone calls to the right people and relentlessly pursuing answers and solutions. And that even though it would be really nice to have

state and county public servants paid by taxpayer money do their jobs and help us out, we can overcome even the mightiest of hurdles with our own people who have a tremendous love of this island and the wherewithal to "make it so."

We should be proud of where we're at, one year later. The damage isn't completely repaired, but look at the amount that has been done.

You didn't win, Ian. Boca Grande did.

Ian

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nails were omnipresent. Almost everyone had tire repairs.

In hindsight, the weak points can be more plainly seen.

"The biggest issue people had was old soffits," said Wojcik, "or too many sliding glass doors back-to-back."

That was the case this week at a house on Gasparilla Street, where two workers from the roofing crew of the North Port firm of Justified Gutters were looking at a whole eave of missing soffits. While they said that they wanted to take time to explain the process, and the failure of the old wood soffits, they quickly ended the conversation by jumping back on task.

"They were designed to pull off," said an unnamed roofer. "We gotta go!"

Crews this week are still busy at condos and properties across the south end, though some projects are complete:

- Boca Grande Beach Club, best known for its mansard roofs and 1970s decorative concrete "breeze block" garden walls, is under a full redo, with a fresh rendering from the Tampa firm Burby Engineering outside, and construction fencing all around.
- Boca Grande Shores has crews from JMH Construction spraying foam insulation under interior roofs.
- At Woodwind, the units are neatly painted, and one unit even has a decorative Hobby Lobby-type "BEACH"

sign at the entrance, a sure sign of being ready for seasonal renters.

The cleanup continues in unanticipated ways.

Tuesday, Robert Walker and a large crew from the Gasparilla Island Water Association were at the Gulf Dunes condos, poking small test holes in the driveway with metal hoses and giant poles.

The landscaping was to be a finishing touch to the full restoration of Gulf Dunes, which looked almost like new, except for a southern unit still needing a rebuild. But it turned out that the seashell gravel brought in for the parking area, in addition to the sand wash, covered over all of the complex's water meter boxes, and they needed to be reinstalled. To find the meters, members of the crew

were marching across the parking lot with metal stakes and long metal straw nozzles, in a systematic manner reminiscent of wartime mine clearance. While the GIWA sticks were not Y-shaped divining or witching rods, the process was just as much guesswork and every bit as painstaking.

Every few feet, they had to poke a hole and shoot water down below the surface to help expose the buried meters.

Is this like dowsing?

"Just a pole," said Walker.

The next day, on Wednesday morning, a crew of three GIWA utility men were still there, poking holes to search for meters in the rain-washed parking lot.



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