

Longboat takes lessons from Irma’s inland path

Officials plan to change re-entry procedure after traffic backed up following the all-clear.

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Hurricane Irma taught the town of Longboat Key some lessons in preparation and recovery, even as the storm passed miles inland of its once-worrisome path.

Irma landed Sunday night near Naples, though for at least a day or two the projected course was right along the coast all the way past Tampa Bay. As it approached the Sarasota-Bradenton area east of Interstate 75 at about 11 p.m. Sunday, its intensity fell to a Category 2 with maximum sustained winds of about 100 mph, according to the National Hurricane Center. Emergency officials estimate its storm surge was about 1 to 3 feet in most areas, instead of the 5 to 8 feet predicted.

Longboat Key residents were part of a county-ordered evacuation of barrier islands, low-lying mainland areas and residents of mobile homes. Town officials said the evacuation plan went better than expected, though Mayor Terry Gans said he would have rather seen more people follow the mandatory order. Officials said they couldn’t estimate how many people stayed behind.

“In one sense, it was a good training exercise,” Gans said. “We’re fortunate that the storm turned out to be less than it was



Cars line up to re-enter the Key starting around 1 p.m. Residents weren’t allowed back on the island until 4 p.m.

Katie Johns

HELPING OUT

The Longboat Key Town Hall is hosting a Comfort Station for residents to gather, grab a coffee or cool drink and cool off and recharge devices. As of Wednesday morning, nearly 2,200 Florida Power & Light customers on Longboat Key were without power. The comfort station, which is being run by volunteers organized by the Longboat Key Garden Club, will run from 9 a.m. to 7 or 8 p.m. throughout the week.

the island after the evacuation, residents were told at noon Monday that re-entry would begin at 4 p.m.

Gans said the notice was the one move the town would reconsider. Cars began lining up to get back onto the island shortly after the announcement came out through email and social media, creating a traffic jam on both ends of the town. After the wait, residents returned to a town its mayor said wasn’t prepared to handle them.

“We frankly rushed the re-entry a little bit because things aren’t perfect here,” Gans said. “I just felt it was really important to get people home.”

When and if the town is ordered to evacuate again, Gans said the town won’t announce a re-entry ahead of time.

Longboat Key Fire Rescue

spearheaded the re-entry process. Crews were on the Key as soon as winds subsided enough to let them safely pass. Recovery efforts began by 2:30 p.m. Monday.

Aside from a few downed trees and power lines that blocked roads, Longboat Key Fire and Rescue Chief Paul Dezzi said there wasn’t much damage.

“We were very lucky in that the storm made the move it did and we had a lot of protective measures in place,” Dezzi said.

Many of those who returned home on Monday afternoon were without electricity, and about 2,200 were still dark on Wednesday.

Restoration progressed in a patchwork pattern, prompting some residents to call for a dedicated contractor to restore island

power-grid infrastructure. Town officials couldn’t explain to exasperated residents the complexities of the power grid and its restoration.

Water service was restored to residents by the time they returned, but a boil-water advisory was still in effect until two lab-test runs confirm purity after the shutdown. The boil-water, lab-test process is routine in cases of water system shutdown or pipe breaks.

The town was able to protect its wastewater system largely due to a handful of Public Works employees whose round-the-clock efforts kept several lift stations from overflowing. Though the town’s largest lift stations were still powered, several of the town’s more than 40 smaller stations were powerless, requiring manual work to keep them from overflowing. Bullock said he had already told officials in Manatee and Sarasota counties to expect a spill, but that was averted because of town workers.

These efforts meant in the days following Irma residents were already close to the conditions they knew before the storm. In fact, even the beaches didn’t suffer. An in email to commissioners, Bullock said the island’s shoreline “fared better than I expected.”

“A lot of people who are living on the island will never see or never know the work that went into this,” Gans said. “[Town employees] did a hell of a job and a tireless job making sure they could get back and live here.”

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