

Snowbirds worried, watched Irma from afar

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STAFF WRITER

As some of their Longboat Key neighbors dashed around from store to home, preparing to evacuate for Hurricane Irma, part-time residents could only watch and, in some cases, worry from hundreds of miles away.

“I’m telling you, we’re looking at every TV screen,” said Paul Ahern, who lives in New England during the summer.

Ahern said the general manager of his winter residence at Beachplace Condominium Association sent continuous updates to out-of-town residents.

Ahern also checked the town of Longboat Key’s website and the national weather forecast.

He wasn’t alone in those routines.

“I did not leave my house Saturday,” Elaine Izaks said from her Illinois home. “I sat in front of the TV watching CNN from morning until night, and we were so lucky how we were saved.”

In Illinois, Michael Miller and his family checked newspaper websites, weather.com and watched TV, too.

“Google Earth was fun just to focus in on the property itself even though it’s not in real time,” Michael Miller said.

Former Mayor Joan Webster, who lives in Michigan, stayed up to date using the town’s CodeRED information system, checking emails and watching The Weather Channel.

She said watching television from afar made her feel helpless.



Longboat Key Public Works Department employees remove a fallen tree from the Bay Isles community on Longboat Key on Monday.

Niki Kottmann

“I wanted to be there helping and doing something,” she said.

For other residents, such as Sandy Cloud, coverage wasn’t comprehensive, making it more frustrating and harder to get accurate updates.

“The one frustrating part, I would say about tracking it on television was there was major focus on obviously the [Florida]

Keys, and then on Naples, and then on Fort Myers, and then on Tampa,” Cloud said from Connecticut. “Sarasota rarely got mentioned, and that was very frustrating. Why aren’t they saying anything about Sarasota as a major population and arts and culture center of the state?”

As Irma neared Florida and residents got ready for its effects, the

snowbirds watched and worried.

“My biggest concern was that people were safe,” Izaks said. “Things can be replaced, but not lives.”

Izaks, like other snowbirds, prepares her Longboat home before heading north for the summer just in case a storm like Hurricane Irma comes ashore. She took fragile art off the wall,

moved furniture inside and had a handyman check her home.

But when it was over and Hurricane Irma moved on, snowbirds were relieved to hear their homes and neighbors were OK.

“We were lucky ... I feel sorry for the people who live in the [Florida] Keys and places who just have suffered great loss,” Cloud said.

Miller was concerned about his home but realized that he’s lucky that isn’t his primary home.

“At the same time, you have to keep it in perspective, that people’s primary homes are there,” he said. “Those people don’t have anywhere to go.”

And, some residents take perspective in another direction. When choosing to live on an island, flooding and other natural disasters can happen.

“We don’t worry that much because when you have a place on an island, you have to know that that’s a possibility from the very beginning,” Sue Reese said from Pennsylvania.

Webster said she knew everything would be OK. Having been involved in town government, she knew the plans that would be put in place. Now, she says, people just need to let officials take the next steps.

“The thing I think is the most important is people have to have patience,” Webster said. “They [town departments and first responders] are the finest around, and they have a good plan. They just need time to implement it and activate it.”

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