

OUR VIEW

City’s shelter problem must be solved

Call it the Game of Lives.

As hundreds of people sat or slept their way through Hurricane Irma at the Venice Community Center, we doubt many would have been happy if they knew they were in a structure not built strong enough for the winds originally projected.

How many would have stayed at the Venice Community Center if they knew the building had a shot at being flooded if Hurricane Irma had remained the massive hurricane we had all expected?

For those of you who did stay at the Community Center, how many of you knew that the city staff had no experience in creating a shelter and was making things up on the fly as they went along?

The fact of the matter is that the city got lucky. The storm turned at the last moment and lost most of its power. The winds dropped way down, and the storm surge was minimal.

Sarasota County to blame, too

But before you get mad at the city of Venice, Sarasota County Government played an even worse part in this Game of Lives. Sarasota County Government told Venice that the Venice Community Center was too dangerous for a storm like Hurricane Irma.

When Venice kept pushing for the Community Center to be opened because there were no other shelters in the city, the county should have held its ground and said, “No, as projected, Hurricane Irma is too strong and too dangerous for the Community Center. People will need to drive to another shelter.”

Instead, the county said, “OK, you can put people in a building that we deem unsafe for this storm. But in case people die or get hurt, we want you to sign paperwork that says you won’t hold the county liable.”

But, wait, it gets worse.

Then the county said, “By the way, you are on your own. We will not provide you any food or water. And forget any help from our experts on how to run a shelter.”

Quite simply, the county crossed its proverbial arms and said, “We will let you use a building we deem unsafe and we’re going to offer nothing in the way of helping you get prepared. If people die, that’s on you, city of Venice.”

A Game of Lives, indeed.

How did we get in this mess?

Wondering how we got to this point

in the first place? It’s the same problem you often seen when a large business starts having issues.

This all comes back to a lack of communication.

It is no secret that the city of Venice and Sarasota County often don’t see eye to eye. And that’s OK, to a certain point. Venice has its priorities, which may not always line up with those of Sarasota County. It happens.

That’s when really good government leaders and politicians begin working on compromises and keeping the lines of communication open. But in this case, many little things went wrong.

Remember how the flood maps got redrawn last year? A lot of people suddenly found their homes in newly designated flood zones and saw their insurance rates skyrocket.

Still don’t remember? Well, you’re not alone. This is one of those cases where if something government-related doesn’t affect you, you tend to ignore it or forget it.

But when those maps were redrawn, Taylor Ranch Elementary went from a perfect place for a shelter to property now in a flood zone. This meant the only possible shelter left for Venice was the Venice Community Center, which is just 17 feet above sea level and close to the Gulf.

This problem could have been caught early

At this point, the county should have looked at the shelter map and said, “Wow, Venice could be in major trouble soon. What can we do about this?”

This is a question that should have been asked a year ago. This is when the county should have said, “We need to meet with the city of Venice about this.”

After all, Venice has one of the oldest populations in the United States. This is a population that wouldn’t even know how to get to the shelters in Sarasota or North Port. And good luck telling people 70 years or older to start driving to unfamiliar places in the rain as a hurricane approaches.

We were a little taken aback when County Administrator Thomas Harmer painted a pretty rosy picture of how well the evacuation efforts went in Sarasota County. During a time when the public was inundated with reports of older people dying in Hollywood, Florida, because of no back-up generator and, therefore, no air-conditioning, the county was cramming hundreds of people into shelters with no generators.

Look at what Sarasota Memorial Hospital did. Not only did it have back-up generators in place, it went



PROVIDED PHOTO

Venice Mayor John Holc is shown here a few years ago bestowing the Mayor’s Pillar of the Community Award to then-Sen. Nancy Detert. She is now a Sarasota County Commissioner. We are calling on Detert to step forward and work with Holc to solve the dire safety issues involving the lack of hurricane shelters in and around Venice. Lives truly are at stake, and Detert can be the key to solving this complicated problem by bringing together the right people.

out of its way to set aside a spot for its employees’ pets. Now that’s planning.

Here is an example of poor planning. Think about being a scared person with a scared family going to a shelter listed on the county website, only to find it full? Then they are told to go to another shelter. They get there and it’s full, too. At what point does panic set in?

What about all the people who showed up at Taylor Ranch Elementary? There were no major signs telling people it was no longer a shelter. There was nobody there handing out maps to other shelters.

And to our elected County Commissioners, we must ask, “Were you really OK with your staff keeping food and help away from the Venice Community Center? Really? You were OK with that? Seriously?”

And to Venice Mayor John Holc: While many are praising you for getting the Community Center open, you did nothing to open the lines of communication in sending a long and sarcastic public letter to the County Commission. We understand that you were upset when you wrote it, but if you had simply taken a different tone you could have inspired sympathy and empathy for Venice’s plight.

At the end of your letter you ask to meet with a county official who will work to solve this problem. Do you really think a county official will want to work with you after such a scathing, public beat-down letter?

This whole problem started because of a lack of communication and seems well on its way to further

delay because of the increasing divide between the county and the city.

Along those same lines, the County Commission should realize that as angry as the mayor was, he is receiving overwhelming support and the county is coming across as an entity that didn’t seem to give a darn for Venice residents.

Nancy Detert, we turn to you

So now we turn to the one person who we think can save the day — County Commissioner Nancy Detert. As a former State Representative and former State Senator, she is known as somebody who can deal with all sorts of personalities and lead a diverse group to a common goal.

Commissioner Detert, will you lead this effort? Will you form the group that pulls together Venice and the county and looks for other shelters in the Venice area?

And can we start this effort soon? Let’s not wait until the end of hurricane season. Let’s do it soon, while we still remember the fear of Hurricane Irma. Let’s do it soon so that if the county or city needs to plunk down some heavy money, both government entities have time to figure out how to do that.

Commissioner Detert, please lead the way and show everybody how to properly open the lines of communication. Let’s show people how to come together for a serious effort.

If anybody can do it, you are the one. Please, no more Game of Lives.



SHOULD THE COUNTY CREATE MORE HURRICANE SHELTERS NEAR VENICE? CALL US AT 941-207-1111.

Editor’s Note: The number for the Let ’em Have It Line is 941-207-1111.

Also, please keep your comments to 200-250 words. Some people are talking several minutes, and we cannot run those comments. They literally would take up half the page you are holding.

Fire Fee Is Wrong. Do I support the proposed city fire assessment? Absolutely not. These funds come out of the general funds, and the people of Venice should not have to have another tax assessment laid on them again. So, I definitely do not support it.

Shark Fishing. Maybe they should do something about the shark fishermen down there at the Venice Pier. Friday morning, I’m down there and a 10-year-old kid catches a shark and brings it up on deck. Everybody gets excited. It appeared to be a lemon shark, and it had been gutted and a dorsal fin was taken off.

It hadn’t been long ago because it hadn’t decomposed or the crabs hadn’t eaten on it. Maybe something does need to be done about the attitude of the so-called “sportsman.” They should close the pier at night.

Slash. Don’t Increase. I’m calling to object to the proposed fire tax that the city is thinking of implementing. It’s preposterous, unwarranted and just shows the poor planning. They just keep

Let ’em



Have It

raising taxes with no sustainable repercussions from the individuals themselves. We are on fixed incomes, for the most part. We expect a basic fire service that’s been planned for.

It’s poor planning on their part, and they ought to slash something somewhere else. Slash the pensions; slash the number of employees. They don’t seem to do this, but businesses do.

North Jetty Condition. Please, look on the North Jetty road because that is a danger for people going out there now. After last night’s rain, it was much worse. So, please, get some rock in there or something that’s going to hold in those huge holes!

LETTERS WELCOME

Letters to the editor are welcome on virtually any subject. They must be signed and give the writer’s address and telephone number for verification. Letters of more than 250 words may be edited for length. We do not publish letters that condemn or praise business service. We do not publish poetry, open letters or letters to third parties. Letters from the same person will not be published more than once a month. Send or bring your letter to the Venice Gondolier Sun, 200 E. Venice Ave., Venice FL 34285. You can also fax signed letters to 941-484-8460 or email them to rdupont@venicegondolier.com. For more information, call 941-207-1000.

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