

Florida hurricane victims visit George County for advice

By Royce Armstrong, George County Times

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Truly a case of neighbor helping neighbor, two buses carrying 65 elected officials and community leaders from the Florida Panhandle came to George County on Monday evening, May 20. They were filled with questions about recovery from a major hurricane and what they could and should expect in the coming weeks and months.

“I just wanted to thank you for welcoming us to George County,” said Kristy H. Terry with the North Florida Inland Long-Term Recovery Group in an email after the meeting. “Hearing from you (Ken Flanagan), Henry, Cammie, Loraine and Butch was the highlight of our trip. You gave us hope and that is what we needed. Thank you for your willingness to share your story and your resources. We will be calling on you!”

On October 10, 2018, Hurricane Michael slammed in the Florida Panhandle, centered near Mexico Beach. The Category Five storm was for the Florida panhandle what Hurricane Katrina was for South Mississippi, only worse.

Hurricane Michael was the first Category Five hurricane to strike the contiguous United States since Hurricane Andrew in 1992, according to Wikipedia.

In addition, it was the third-most intense Atlantic hurricane to make landfall in the contiguous United States in terms of pressure, behind the 1935 Labor Day hurricane and Hurricane Camille of 1969. It was the first Category Five hurricane on record to impact the Florida Panhandle and was the fourth-strongest landfalling hurricane in the contiguous United States, in terms of wind speed.

The people who were in the storm’s path are still trying to figure out how to put their lives back together.

“You never know where the relationships you form will take you,” said George County Communications and Economic Development Director Ken Flanagan. George County officials have, over the course of the past half dozen years, developed a relationship with people in the Marianna, Florida area who work at the Enviva Cottontdale wood pellet facility.

“Out of the blue I got a call,” Flanagan continued. “Some elected officials from that area wanted to come and meet with us. They wanted some real-world advice on where their recovery efforts should be at this point and in the months ahead.”

Flanagan pulled together a team to answer their questions. That team included Dist. Five Supervisor Henry Cochran; Chancery Clerk Cammie Byrd; former Emergency Management Coordinator Loraine Howell; and Butch Loper, a retired Emergency Management Director from Jackson County.

One of the major frustrations the Florida group had, Flanagan said was Congress’ failure so far to appropriate recover funding promised by President Trump and the national media’s lack of interest in the aftermath of Hurricane Michael.

All four of the panel members emphasized not proceeding with anything until Congressional approval is granted and documenting everything in detail. Byrd told the group about significant land record changes- people moving, etc., that can be expected. Howell pointed out that a significant percent of their people are now in temporary housing – FEMA trailers and hurricane cottages. She told them if they have another major hurricane, they need to make evacuation plans because housing structures are less sturdy. Loper went over federal forms they need to complete for assistance.

“I wanted to thank you and the George County panel for taking the time and sharing your experiences

and lessons learned,” said Susan Gage of the Early Learning coalition of Northwest Florida about the meeting. “I really appreciate (the) approach. Actually, it was one of the most informative and entertaining presentations I have had the privilege to be a part of.”

What was planned as a tow hour meeting turned into a three-and-a half –hour meeting. Flanagan said. “there were a lot of tears and hugging,” he noted, saying real friendships were established among members within the Florida group and with George County team. “After the short presentations, it turned into a long question and answer session.”

It has been nearly 14 years since Hurricane Katrina swept across South Mississippi, but the devastation and lessons learned are still clearly etched in the minds and memories of community leaders here. Flanagan said the George County panel was honored to be able to share their experiences with the Florida officials.