

Blue Ribbon Committee Final Report

I. Introduction

The Coral Gables City Commission empaneled a Blue Ribbon Committee comprised of highly qualified professional local residents to review, assess and provide recommendations to the Commission based on the City's recent response to Hurricane Irma and to evaluate the City's current level of preparedness for natural disasters.

This report, which includes recommendations and observations related to Hurricane Irma, should not be considered as an exhaustive list of possible solutions that could be implemented by the City when dealing with City-wide emergencies, but rather strategic steps to address the basic areas of concern expressed by local residents during the most recent emergency event.

The goal of the ten month observation period was to offer feedback that would help increase the City's overall preparedness and ability to respond to any catastrophic event while keeping in the mind the need to protect life and property before, during and after the event. Specifically, the Commission requested the Committee review the new public safety building, use of CCTV technology, underground utilities, the current City contracts for debris monitoring and removal services, availability of Miami Dade's disposal facilities and FEMA reimbursement efforts.

The Committee reviewed an extensive amount of information from City staff and some of that information gathering included presentations from the following:

Peter J. Iglesias, City Manager
Frank Fernandez, Former Assistant City Manager, Public Safety Director
Ed Santamaria, Assistant City Manager (Public Works)
Maria Higgins-Fallon, Communication Manager
Celeste S. Walker, Assistant Finance Director for Procurement
Stephanie Throckmorton, Assistant City Attorney

II. Event Background – Hurricane Irma

A summary of the event:

September 9 – 10, 2017 – Hurricane Irma impacted the area
September 10, 2017 – Miami-Dade County was granted a disaster declaration by FEMA
September 11, 2017 – Rescue Recon groups were dispatched throughout the City
September 15, 2017 – Full pavement clearing was concluded
September 16, 2017 – First of loads of debris collected at first DMS location
September 18, 2017 – Normal garbage collection services resumed
September 21, 2017 – Second DMS location was opened for debris collection
September 25, 2017 – Third DMS locations was opened for debris collection & normal recycling services resumed

October 8, 2017 – Conclusion of the first Citywide sweep for debris
October 30, 2017 – Normal bulk trash collection resumed
November 6, 2017 – Debris removal operations were substantially completed
Total vegetative debris collected – 345,915 (CY)
Total non-vegetative debris collected – 12,000 (CY)
Total quantity of mulch hauled to final disposition – 144,093 (CY)
Total number of truck loads received (vegetative) – 19,200

III. Overall Assessment

The Committee believes that overall, the City performed very well given the size of the storm, and these areas will be highlighted below, but the Committee is aware that had it been a more severe Hurricane, the difficulty in meeting citizen expectations would have been much more difficult to manage.

Areas where the City excelled include management of debris collection, reduction & final disposal, and in pre-storm planning. Areas where the City may be able to improve include having provisions for alternate forms of communication with citizens, specifically methods that are not reliant on digital platforms (internet enabled).

IV. Limitations & Exclusions

Due to the fact that the City was engaged in litigation with Florida Power & Light (FPL) during a majority of the time the Committee was engaged in their work, the Committee was limited in its ability to investigate FPL's preparation and response to the storm, or significantly probe the City's interaction with the utility, before during or after the event. The Committee believes that for a storm of this size, restoration of electrical power is the most significant concern of residents, so the Committee's inability to delve into these matters was significant deficiency of this report.

V. Functional Assessment

This report will address the following key areas while outlining the obstacles encountered during the storm, what the City could have done to combat the issues and where the City rose above expectations:

- A. Preparation
- B. Communication, Post Storm
- C. Utilities
- D. Emergency Contracts (Monitoring & Debris Collection)
- E. Debris Collection, Reduction & Final Disposal
- F. FEMA Reimbursement

A. Preparation

- 20,000 copies of Hurricane Prep, print form Newsletters to 13,000 households
- Detailed Outreach campaign which typically begins in Jun, with weekly changes in theme
- Social Media – 12,000 Twitter followers
- In-telligent, a mobile application, with 1000 subscribers
- eNews – 8,000 subscribers (note that subscribers may not be residents)
- Coral Gables TV videos
- Emergency Operations Center (EOC) monthly meetings, with Desktop simulation activities of various scenarios
- The City increased tree trimming activities
- City employees not deemed “essential” are planned to be reassigned to support response and recovery activities.
- Replacement of existing EOC, with new Public Safety Building, expected to be available in 2020.

Recommendations/Summary:

As will be mentioned in more detail in the following section, the committee recommends that additional personnel be prepared for more personal and interactive communication. These “neighborhood ambassadors” would need to be recruited and trained prior to any event, and be able to disseminate information to residents who may not have access to electronic forms of information.

B. Communication, Post Storm

- *Full page ad in Herald, every Sunday, Sep-Nov regarding recovery efforts*
- *Active in social media, which was a communication channel left intact after Hurricane Irma, but which may not be available had the storm be more severe*

Recommendations/Summary:

Activation of a “boot on the ground” communication network recruited and trained prior to storm season. This network would receive its information from City staff via direct or radio connection to the EOC. Team members would then personally and verbally distribute this information throughout the City to better reach those residents who may not have access to other channels of communication. Volunteers could be solicited from Citizen Crime watch groups, Boy scouts, Civic Clubs, and students seeking community service hours, etc. Frequency of communication would vary depending on the severity of the storm.

Utilize and possibly increase the Neighborhood Safety... (golf cart program) to speed getting information into accessible neighborhoods. The Committee strongly believes that more personal forms of

communication are needed to inform, update and calm residents of the City. The concept is focused on increasing access to accurate information.

C. Utilities

- Multiple utilities could be impacted by a hurricane, including telephone, internet providers, cable TV, natural gas, and water & sewer, but none are seemingly more important to residents than electricity.
- As mentioned in the Limitations & Exclusions section of this report, the Committee was limited in its ability to evaluate FPL's preparation and response to the storm, or the City's interactions with the utility, but the Committee is compelled to independently offer our suggestions, and our personal observations.
- Throughout much of the City of Coral Gables, FPL distribution facilities are located overhead, on poles in the rear easement of most residences. Additionally, much of the electrical conductors are bare, uninsulated, single stranded wires, which were erected under earlier utility construction standards. Considering the vegetative growth of Coral Gables, and relative inaccessibility of these utilities, they are more susceptible to windstorm damage.
- It has been technically proven that relocating electrical lines underground is the proper long-term solution, a solution already implemented in Aventura, Miami Lakes and parts of Coral Gables (Cocoplum). These areas have conclusively experienced shorter or no down time during past storm. A project proposal to relocate the electrical utilities from overhead to underground was reviewed by the Committee, exposing the challenges of financing such an endeavor and getting access to easements and setbacks. Even if economically feasible, a project of this magnitude could take many years to complete, and thus would not provide any near term improvements in restoration times.
- FPL has been involved in a "hardening" project for over 10 years; however, it is unknown how much of the City's electrical infrastructure has been improved by this project.
- Generic restoration times provided by FPL in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma lessened residents confidence in the utility, as even their mobile app gave no valuable information.

Recommendations/Summary:

While phased replacement of overhead lines with underground ones should be considered, and could probably be mandated for new projects, other interim solutions should be negotiated with FPL. Replacement of the before mentioned bare secondary conductor with insulated, stranded, cable could be one way to reduce tree damage, but the utility would need to be compelled to make such a change. Likewise,

a phased move of overhead lines to underground ones should be considered.

The Committee recommends that the City should expect FPL to provide routine and formal status reports for this project, and that this information should be presented to the City Commission periodically, preferably with a senior level FPL representative in attendance.

The frequency of FPL's tree trimming activities should be reviewed, and the City should consider requesting status reports on these activities as well. Such coordination with the City may extend to City officials facilitating easement access in cases where residents deny access to the tree trimming crews.

Lastly, the City of Coral Gables has an assigned FPL Account Manager, who is the liaison between the utility and City staff. Following a storm event, the City should expect that this individual provide restoration information that is specific to the City.

D. Emergency Contracts (Monitoring & Debris Collection)

- During the event the City had an active contract in place for Debris Management Services Contract – RFP 2008.05.05. Originally awarded in March 2009 to AshBritt, Inc. (Primary) and Ceres Environmental Services, Inc. (Secondary)
- Additionally, an active contract for Disaster Recover Management Services (Monitoring) – E67-14 was in place that was originally awarded by Pompano Beach to Witt O'Brien, LLC
- In December 2017 the City issued RFP 2018-001 for Disaster Debris Monitoring Services to engage the services of one primary contractor. The new contract is FEMA compliant and follows all of the rules and regulations required to be eligible for reimbursement of expenses. The contract was awarded to Tetra Tech, Inc.
- In March 2018, the City issued RFP 2018-009 for Disaster Debris Removal Services to engage the services of three contractors. The new contract is FEMA compliant and follows all of the rules and regulations required to be eligible for reimbursement of expenses. The contract was awarded to AshBritt, Inc. (Primary), Phillips and Jordan, Inc. (Secondary) and Ceres Environmental Services, Inc. (Tertiary).
- The City took a triple redundancy approach when dealing with the debris removal contract to ensure the proper amount of coverage no matter the size of the emergency event.

Recommendations/Summary:

There are no recommendations at this time. The Committee agrees with the approach to directly engage contractors and execute contracts prior to the event.

E. Debris Collection, Reduction & Removal

The City faced several significant challenges with debris management in the aftermath of Irma. Debris management contractors were already thinly spread as a result of mobilizing in other areas in the wake of Hurricane Harvey.

In terms of storm debris collection, the scarcity of crews and equipment left prime contractors with extremely limited availability of subcontractors, which are the real “boots on the ground” for actual debris collection, reduction, and transportation. The few subcontractors that were available locally were seeking relatively high rates, which were furthered by a short-notice debris collection bid by Miami-Dade County that also resulted in rates that were significantly higher than those in the past. Like other municipalities and jurisdictions throughout the region, Coral Gables was competing for a limited number of resources while the market rates for the required services were skyrocketing. At the same time, the City’s then-current debris contracts were several years old, and not reflective of the new market realities.

Given the challenges above, the City used a creative “private sector” perspective in addressing debris collection. Rather than trying to match the newly increased rates, the City instead made it more efficient for the contractors by reducing their turnaround time for delivering collected debris to the reduction sites. The contractors realized that they could make more money at the City’s relatively lower rates because they could collect and haul more loads in a given shift. This was made possible by the City’s speed in leasing a parcel in an industrial area that allowed debris reduction to operate 24-7, and was close enough to the debris collection areas that turnaround time was minimized.

While the City is to be commended for quickly entering into a lease agreement for the new debris reduction site, it is important to keep in mind that Irma was not a “major” storm. Had it arrived as a Category 3, 4, or 5, the newly leased parcel would not have been adequate to expedite cleanup, even in conjunction with the other two sites used during Irma.

An additional challenge arose with final disposal of reduced debris. Although the City has a long-term disposal agreement with Miami-Dade County, final disposal options from the county were unclear. It appeared that the county was unable or unwilling to accept the large volumes of storm

debris from the City, and the City therefore sought other options. The glut of reduced debris and lack of local non-county disposal sites resulted in the City arranging final disposal at a site in Pompano Beach.

Recommendations/Summary:

The City managed the debris collection and reduction well, by making the operations efficient rather than paying higher unit rates. The City has since entered into new debris management contracts, with new safeguards and reasonable cost of living provisions to reduce the risk of not having access to sufficient resources after future storms.

The City should permanently secure the newly leased debris reduction site, preferably through purchase. The City is also encouraged to seek additional potential sites located in non-residential areas that would allow for increased 24-7 operations in the event of a major storm.

In the case of a major storm, the City will need to make policy decisions that trade-off recovery speed against residents' short-term inconveniences. In other words, should the City stage reduction sites in close proximity to residential areas if that expedites recovery?

The City should attempt to negotiate availability and terms for final disposal of storm debris with Miami-Dade County to avoid the need to transport debris out of county.

F. FEMA Reimbursement

- The City is on target with submitting requests for reimbursement to FEMA as compared to other municipalities.
- The City has projects in three (3) allowable categories for expenditures which are: Category A – Debris removal expenditures, Category B – Emergency Protective Measures and Other Categories (C-G).
- All projects must be submitted to the State from FEMA. Once funds have been appropriated, FEMA sends the project to the State for review.
- The State of Florida issues reimbursement after their review.
- FEMA Reimbursement rates – September 4, 2017 – September 17, 2018 is 75%; September 18, 2017 – October 17, 2018 is 90%; October 18, 2017 – December 16, 2017 is 80% and December 17, 2017 – March 3, 2018 is 75%.

Recommendations/Summary:

There are no recommendations at this time.

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