



October 10, 2018

Dear Chairman Mansfield and fellow Commissioners:

We of the Down East Council, representing the 13 unincorporated communities east of the North River Bridge, are writing to express our grave concerns about inadequacies in storm preparation and response in the wake of Hurricane Florence. Our overall concern is the need for more effective implementation of a disaster plan that serves the citizens of Carteret County, including the especially low-lying communities of Down East. Our areas of focus are 1. Evacuation and Shelters, 2. Communications and System-Navigation and 3. Post-storm housing.

- 1. Evacuation and Shelters.** According to the 2015 Emergency Operations Plan under *ESF #6*: “Several facilities have been designated as hurricane shelters within the County and all are in compliance with the Americans with Disability Act. The complete list is maintained in the Carteret County Emergency Services Department and the Chapter of the American Red Cross. The emergency shelters are Carteret County Schools: **West Carteret High School, Atlantic Elementary, Beaufort Elementary and Newport Middle. Newport Middle School** has been designated as a Pet Co-Location Shelter. Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners in coordination with the Emergency Services Director, Carteret County Department of Social Services Director, and the Carteret County Public School System, or their designees will make decisions on when and where to open shelters in a large-scale emergency.”

**However**, the plan evolved from a September 11 evacuation order directing citizens to leave the county for an inland shelter in Knightdale (bus transportation **was** offered to those who signed up by 9:30 a.m. September 12) to a “last resort” shelter at Newport Middle School which opened at 5:00 p.m. on eve of storm (September 12) after Knightdale reached capacity. In Down East, Atlantic Elementary was opened informally at the urging of the community and was operated/monitored by the Atlantic Civic and Beautification Committee. Citizens ensured that EMS personnel were in place, a generator was set up with surplus fuel, and meals cooked and served to 35-40 citizens. Beaufort Elementary and the Leon Mann Center were opened as shelters post-storm, the latter posting contradictory information as to when it would close.

***Recommendation:*** *Have a process in place triggering opening of in-county shelters upon the approach of a hurricane as stipulated in the County Emergency Operations plan. Although a mandatory evacuation order was in place, it is important that we recognize that our most vulnerable citizens do not have the means to evacuate to distant locations. Making local shelters available should be systematic – not informal or piecemeal.*

- 2. Communications and System-Navigation.** Very much linked to both the evacuation/shelter issue and the post-storm housing issue, citizens Down East were and are unsure of where to find necessary information related to the storm preparation and recovery. Cable service and Internet went down on September 13, and email updates from County EOC were unavailable. Cell service went down shortly thereafter, as did land lines. Fire Departments Down East were left with radio communication only.

***Recommendation:** Ensure that all information is pre-planned, consistent, and distributed in hard-copy poster-form to designated points in communities (e.g. fire stations, churches). For post-storm services (FEMA housing, small-business loans, grocery aid, etc.), provide knowledgeable people to help citizens navigate often confusing, multi-step application process.*

- 3. Post-storm Housing.** More than 100 families were displaced due to flooding and rain-water damage to their homes in the Down East region alone. This number was tallied by citizen volunteers surveying community leaders and counting gutted houses. In the western part of the county, citizens likewise stepped up to determine the number of people displaced from their homes or condemned apartments. A severe lack of affordable and temporary housing became evident. According to the Hurricane Matthew Resilient Redevelopment Plan (2017), of Carteret County's 48,690 housing units, only 1,218 are classified as "affordable", or just 2.5%. A staggering 39% of homes are "vacant", most on Bogue Banks, indicating that these are second homes or rentals. This shows an emphasis on investment properties rather than affordable housing for year 'round residents, a problem duly magnified in times of catastrophe such as Hurricane Florence. Citizens took it upon themselves to organize a housing fair, trying to match people offering spare rooms with displaced persons.

***Recommendation:** Implement a county-wide system of damage assessment and displacement counts. **Have a plan identifying potential temporary housing.** Address the root problem by, prioritizing the creation of more affordable housing in Carteret County for year 'round residents.*

Thank you for considering our concerns. We hope you take them seriously. We also remind you of high-priority recommendations in the Hurricane Matthew Resilient Redevelopment Plan. We urge you to move forward with that plan in order to proactively address hazard mitigation and risk reduction for Down East and Carteret County as a whole.

Sincerely,

Lillie Miller, President  
Down East Council