

IT'S HURRICANE SEASON – BE PREPARED!

By Eleanor Cicerchi

IMPORTANT INFORMATION RELATING TO THE PANDEMIC: This year our annual hurricane preparedness update takes into account a new factor: the pandemic and the importance of social distancing and masks in mitigating its spread and impact. The information about evacuation routes, what to pack in a “go bag,” how to stay on top of the storm’s path, etc. in this article is still accurate. However, instead of the four evacuation shelters in northern Pinellas named here, the Pinellas County Office of Emergency Management is making arrangements for more than 100 emergency shelters – in schools and other buildings where groups of fewer than 11 people not in the same household can take shelter while staying six feet apart. Additionally, the Office of Emergency Management is attempting to secure a large quantity of masks but cannot guarantee that they will be available for everyone. Please take your own mask if you have one. The list of shelters and other information about pandemic mitigation is not yet complete; thus, we are unable to include it here. But we expect the County to publish its usual Hurricane Guide, listing all the confirmed shelters as of the publication date. We will alert you when that happens.

Another circumstance to consider this year is the increased risk of hurricanes. El Nino, which warms Pacific waters and suppresses hurricane formation in the Atlantic, has been weakening for the past three years and is now gone. Also, the west-African monsoon is stronger than usual. As a result, meteorologists are predicting a more active hurricane season this year: 16 named storms, 8 hurricanes and 4 major hurricanes. This prediction compares to the 30-year average of 12 named storms, 6 hurricanes and 3 major hurricanes.

Yes, Tampa Bay has escaped a direct hit by a hurricane for nearly 100 years. However, our experience of Hurricane Irma’s near miss in September 2017 has heightened awareness of the danger and losses these large storms can bring our way. 2020 is on track to be one of the hottest, if not the hottest, year in recorded human history – a phenomenon that increases the likelihood of extreme weather such as heat waves, tornadoes, wildfires, droughts and, of course, violent storms including hurricanes and heavy rains with high winds and flooding. With the 2020 hurricane season upon us – June 1 through November 30 – it’s time to ensure that we have the supplies and information we need to stay safe and minimize damage to our property.

This article, updated from 2017, 2018 and 2019, is a summary of ways to avoid or minimize hurricane damage or harm to your family, your pets and your property.

A Recent Change in Quail Forest's Evacuation Level

All of Quail Forest is an Evacuation Level B area, which means that evacuation is mandatory when potential storm tide heights are higher than 8 to 14 feet or higher. We used to be in a Level C area (storm tide heights of up to 19 feet), but that has been changed, says the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council. Those of us who have lived here for a few years have seen how quickly some areas in East Lake Woodlands have temporarily flooded and understand the wisdom of the change.

Gather Essential Items

Many disaster guides recommend that you have a “go bag” in a front closet or near the door. This should include a flashlight and batteries, drinking water, medications, power bars or nuts, a rain poncho and small pillow. If you have pets, pack what they will need, too (see more below). A new recommendation is to purchase at least one of the new LED, battery-operated lights that provide up to 5,000 lumens of light, enough to illuminate an entire room. And don't forget extra batteries.

If evacuation seems likely, here is a handy checklist for items to gather and put in your car:

- Flashlight, a high-powered Halo light and batteries or a battery-operated lantern
- Medications for 7 days in zip-lock bags (the plastic 7-day containers are handy and don't take up much room)
- Sleeping bag or blanket(s) and pillow(s)
- Shelf-stable food such as power bars, camping or military packets, or canned goods and a non-electric can opener
- Portable fresh water container that will last 2-3 days, water purification tablets, portable camp stove, water-proof matches or a lighter, and a cooler or ice chest
- Rain poncho
- Insect repellent
- Portable battery-operated fan
- Solar-panel charger for your phone or tablet or a small battery-powered radio
- Extra clothes
- Books, small games

Also, remember to keep with you your government-issued photo ID, passport, immigration documents (if relevant) and a copy of your insurance policy with the agent's name and contact information. It's a good idea, too, to scan these documents into a cloud-based service such as Google Drive, iCloud or Dropbox in advance so that they are available to you off-site.

If you have pets, see below for advice on being ready to evacuate them.

Make an Emergency Plan

Often you need go no further than 8 to 10 miles inland or to higher ground to be out of harm's way. Quail Forest's evacuation route is north and east, away from the coast and Tampa Bay. Identify family or friends with whom you can stay for a few days or, if a storm is imminent, make a hotel reservation in advance if you are not planning to go to a shelter.

Evacuation Route

Our evacuation route is north on East Lake Road (# 611) and east on Keystone Road or Trinity Road or north on Route 19 and east to Keystone Road. Most people will head northeast on I-75 toward Ocala. How far you go will depend on the advance plans you have made or the advice you receive on your phone, TV, computer or radio. You may also seek shelter in a designated North Pinellas Evacuation Shelter, although local, state and Federal emergency management offices advise that an emergency shelter should be your last resort.

Where are the closest evacuation shelters?

The closest evacuation shelters are East Lake High School, 1300 Silver Eager Drive in Tarpon Springs, west off East Lake Road, and Brooker Creek Elementary School at 3130 Forelock Road, Tarpon Springs, east off East Lake Road. Both are well marked. There you will find food, water, cots, rest rooms, and volunteers to make you comfortable.

In an evacuation shelter, expect no privacy and a space no larger than 6" x 5' for you and your belongings. For that reason, you are advised not to bring bulky items. Also, don't bring expensive jewelry or other valuables, because the shelter may not have police officers on-site.

Former Quail Forest board member Mike DiFabbio, who has helped organize and run pet-friendly evacuation centers and was active in rescuing pets after Hurricane Katrina, reminds us, "Evacuation shelters are not a Resort; they are Last Resort." Please plan accordingly.

What if I have pets with me?

Pets (generally dogs and cats only) are welcome at Dunedin Highland Middle School, 70 Patricia Avenue, Dunedin, or Oak Grove Middle School at 1370 South Belcher Road, Clearwater, but only on a first-come, first-served basis. Remember to take a pet ID and photo (ideally, your pet will be micro-chipped, too), your contact information and updated records for proof of shots or county license, which most pet-friendly shelters require. Also take a pet carrier, a 7-day supply of pet food and medications, dishes for food and water, a leash, and a non-electric can opener or litter box, if appropriate. Comfort items such as a blanket or toy can help your pet get through the disruption.

Options other than shelters include arranging to go to a family member or friend's home on higher ground or a pet-friendly hotel or motel.

If you have other animals, such as birds or even horses, the Humane Society of Tampa Bay has checklists to help assure that you don't overlook any important item. See www.humanesocietytampa.org.

What if I or someone in my group uses a wheelchair or is mobility impaired?

All shelter *entrances* are handicapped accessible. The two nearest shelters with ADA-accessible *restrooms*, as well, are Dunedin Highland Middle School, 70 Patricia Avenue, Dunedin, or Oak Grove Middle School at 1370 South Belcher Road, Clearwater.

The County and East Lake Fire Rescue (Station 56 is at East Lake Road near the North Gate to East Lake Woodlands) are also resources for ensuring that people with physical disabilities get to safety before or after a hurricane or other emergency. A special needs list evacuation database is managed by the Pinellas County Department of Health and is updated by the Department of Health, County Department of Emergency Management Services and East Lake Fire Rescue. To check if someone is on that list or to add or remove a name, call the East Lake Fire Rescue at 727-784-8668 or the County Department of Emergency Management Services at 727-464-3800 (follow the prompts). East Lake Fire Rescue phones people on that list annually to check on current status. Transporting disabled people in emergencies is ultimately the responsibility of the County. Remember that such trips are done before and after the emergency but not at its height.

How do I know if a hurricane is headed our way and how strong it is?

Those of us with smart phones will likely receive push texts notifying us of a *hurricane warning* (hurricane conditions, or sustained winds of 74 mph or more, are expected in our area within the next 36 hours) or *hurricane watch* (hurricane conditions are possible in our area within 48 hours). Local television stations run these warnings at the bottom of the screen as a hurricane-strength storm approaches and often have round-the-clock coverage of the storm instead of network feeds. You can also follow a storm's progress on The Weather Channel or go to one of the popular smart phone weather apps such as WeatherBug, apps for local television stations and the Tampa Bay Times mobile app. Additionally, you can use your PC or laptop to register for breaking news and text alerts at www.tampabay.com or www.tbo.com. Every media outlet in our area is likely to be tuned to the storm's progress, so check frequently. You'll also find up-to-date reports on major national media.

How will my home or business be protected if I need to leave?

The local police are responsible for protecting abandoned homes and businesses until the Governor calls in the National Guard. The most vulnerable time is during the high point of the storm before the National Guard arrives. The most important advice is **not to stay in your home or business if you are ordered to evacuate**. Stories about the risks of remaining in your home despite an evacuation order abound. The priority should be keeping people and pets safe and out of harm's way.

Who's in Charge of Emergency Response in Our Area?

Quail Forest is reliant on Pinellas County for law, fire and emergency services, and the first contact in an emergency should be Pinellas County 911. When the State of Florida declares a State of Emergency, East Lake Fire Rescue (Station 57 beside the North Gate at East Lake Road is closest to Quail Forest and becomes an Emergency Operations Center, coordinating with the Regional Emergency Operations Center on Ulmerton Road in Largo. Staff at the Fire Rescue switch to 12- hour work periods, with all personnel remaining on station until the need is reduced.

The Quail Forest Emergency Preparedness Plan completed in September 2019 and available on the QF website, QuailForest@info, at the pool and from Street Captains, is an operating plan for emergencies and disasters. It contains helpful information about mitigating risk to your home and family, resource lists and contact numbers. In Quail Forest, responsibility for preparedness, response and recovery rests with the Quail Forest Emergency Response team, appointed and empowered by the Board of Directors. Team members include the President of the Board, Property Manager, Communications Committee Chair, Maintenance Manager, and others appointed by the President. The purpose of appointing an Emergency Response Team and pre-assigning responsibilities is to ensure that QF is not dependent upon any one individual and that decisions and communications are closely coordinated with the East Lake Woodlands Association, county, state, and Federal officials, and shared with QF residents.

Here's wishing for a hurricane-free, healthy and safe summer and fall for Quail Forest and all of Tampa Bay!

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