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Hurricane Florence: One year later

Wounds are still healing

By **Jefferson Weaver**
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A year after Hurricane Florence, the storm's marks are still readily seen throughout Columbus County.

High water marks are easily visible on roofs in Crusoe Island. Mold is thick on windows of empty storefronts in Fair Bluff, even in a building that was restored after Hurricane Matthew. Piles of debris are shrinking at Lake Waccamaw, but lumber, pieces of deck and odd tangles of boating gear float up on the shore. Thousands of limbs and tree trunks form a natural dam along White Marsh in Whiteville. Homes still bear the spray painted marking that show they were checked in Riegelwood.

Hurricane Florence was just another tropical weather system when she first made the news on Sept. 7, 2018. The storm actually weakened on that date, and both the National Weather Service and local emergency officials paid more attention to the other systems swirling in the Atlantic. Volunteer relief groups from across the country were back in the area repairing homes damaged by Matthew.

By Sept. 9, however, all eyes were on Florence, and Florence seemed aimed at southeastern North Carolina. After spending more than a day as a Category 4 major hur-

ricane, Florence weakened to a Category 1 as it approached the Carolina coasts, but at 450 miles wide, the slow-moving storm's effects were causing damage here on Sept. 12, two days before its first landfall at Wrightsville Beach.

As damaging as the winds were throughout Columbus County, the water was worse.

Although few gauges were installed in Columbus County during Florence, those that were yielded amazing totals: Whiteville officially saw 25.91 inches of rain between Sept. 14-17, although other measures in the area put the number at around 30. Lake Waccamaw saw more than 30.

No gauge was installed at Fair Bluff at the time, but upstream at Lumberton, 22.76 inches overwhelmed dikes and drainage systems, sending massive amounts of runoff downstream where an estimated 20 inches had already fallen in Boardman and Fair Bluff. Crusoe, Old Dock and Ash were caught between a rock and a hard place — more than 24 inches of rain fell in a swath from Wilmington to South Carolina as Florence meandered inland from the coast.

The Waccamaw River was continuing to rise as floodwa-

ters rolled downstream from central Columbus County. Livingston Creek not only topped its banks as far out as Prosper and Freeman, but the rising Cape Fear River meant that floodwaters in the eastern section of the county had nowhere to go. Across the Cape Fear in Kelly and Bladen County, the dike built in response to the cataclysmic 1946 flood failed. Floodwaters from the Black and Cape Fear rivers met in Pender County, miles above the natural confluence of the two streams.

So the Swamp overcame the temporary barricades surrounding the Duke Progress substation in White-

ville, flooding the facility yet again. Miles of power lines were snagged and tangled with falling trees and debris. Some areas of the county were without power for ten days.

While road debris was generally cleared by fire departments and the Department of Transportation within a few days, flooding chopped the county in half, as White Marsh blocked off U.S. 74-76 and Jefferson Street at Whiteville, swamps surrounding Lees Lake rose over the roadways, and dozens of smaller creeks and streams left their banks.

Livingston Creek was more than 20 feet above the Old Stage Road Bridge in Riegelwood, inundating the Scotchman convenience store and Camlin's Automotive — as well as a number of homes in the Acme area.

The floodwaters were so severe that some emergency responders heading for the coast couldn't make it to Wilmington, so they set up shop in Columbus County fire departments, assisting in water rescues and other operations.

On a brighter note, we all learned from Florence.

County and municipal governments are working to improve drainage throughout the county. The sheriff's office took advantage of a program that supplies military surplus vehicles to local governments, so high-water capable vehicles are now on hand if needed. Area fire departments are expanding their own stocks of boats, and volunteers are attending swift water rescue certification classes.

Inside *The News Reporter* today, you'll find a special section about the trials and tribulations of Hurricane Florence. The staff tried to find a good balance of stories from throughout the county, but there were simply too many stories to be told. Like the storm itself, our county's experiences with Hurricane Florence were overwhelming to everyone.

As damaging as the winds were throughout Columbus County, the water was worse.

Floodwaters in Fair Bluff (above by Martin Scott) and Whiteville (below by Grant Merritt).





Staff file photo by Les High

Flooding on South Franklin Street in Whiteville.

Florence memories still vivid a year later

By Grant Merritt
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Every Columbus County resident has a Hurricane Florence story — and many memories are still painful on the one-year anniversary of the storm.

Tankeisha Cutler Graham said her family endured a great deal of suffering during and after Hurricane Florence. Losing all food in her home with a two-year old son, Graham sustained roof and window leaks in four rooms in addition to the cave-in of her hallway closet. She explained that the process to receive assistance for repairs was grueling and more complicated than during Hurricane Matthew.

“It’s hard to believe, but we still have tarps on our roof today,” Graham said. “As recent as a month ago, we just received payment from our insurance company to repair the house damage from Hurricane Florence.”

As a social worker with the Department of Social Services, Lashoney Frink said she was required to work 12-hour days in

evacuation shelters. Enduring the personal hardship and emotional stress of being away from her one-year-old daughter and home during Hurricane Florence, Frink said she had to remain strong to ensure the comfort of people staying at evacuation shelters.

“I had to prepare my family for what they needed, but I ran out of cash, ran out of ice and lost all our food,” Frink said.

Johnna Harrelson, an employee at Boys and Girls Homes, remembered the heartbreak of seeing damage to the campus and devastation on so many faces in Lake Waccamaw. She said she did not get any “awful damage” from Florence at her home, and her power was off for “three or four days.”

“Several of us came in after the storm to help clean up the campus, and during that time,” Harrelson explained, “a huge food truck came

with free food for those who were still without power.”

Old Dock Elementary School Principal Ronna Gore said she still has students with tarps on their roofs. She said that since students are still feeling the effects of Hurricane Florence, she employed a therapy dog named Dennisevich to help students. She said the terrier is from Wilmington and was at her school two weeks before Hurricane Dorian formed.

Lake Waccamaw resident Laci Hardin said her family evacuated to her in-laws’ home during Hurricane Florence. More than a week after the storm, Hardin was able to return to her home, where she said the floodwaters stopped at her porch.

“Piers were gone and so many lake homes were destroyed by the flood waters,” Hardin recalled. “Driving down Waccamaw Shores

and Lakeshore Drive was a sight I will never forget. It was the sight of complete devastation and heart-break.”

Whiteville handy serviceman Jay White said that preparation was his biggest failure with Hurricane Florence. Keeping a tote bag ready for emergencies, White said he has a stock of canned chicken, crackers, canned food, trail mix, dehydrated milk, flashlights, eight cases of water and military Ready To Eat meals at all times.

“We have food for seven people for 14 days,” White said.

Charlie Jarman evacuated to stay with his father in Kinston for 10 days, and had two unsuccessful attempts to return home. When he finally returned, he found only debris and minor roof damage — but his inability to check on his home was stressful.

“The only effect I feel today is the tenacity to ride out a storm at home,” Jarman said. “I don’t want to have the uncertainty we felt not knowing if our home was flooded or the roof was intact with the last hurricane.”

Readers remember

I loved how our county came as one to help each other. How our neighboring counties donated and came to our aid in a time of need. My sister, Chrystal Godwin Blackburn, and I had the opportunity to help gather and delivery supplies to the Old Dock/ Crusoe & Pireway River Community. We also assisted in the Operation Air Drop and went to the airport to meet planes that was bringing stuff to us and collected items for those in need and delivered to them. We met some awesome pilots who donated their time to fly those items into Columbus County. The pilot would packed the planes to bring as much as they could . We had the opportunity to meet some people from each end of our county that was there also to help get things needed for our area. We would wait and all help each other unload the planes and then sort the items out and share them from one end of the county to the other end. We ask each other who needed what and we would help each other. Strangers became friends during that time and it was a awesome experience. It was amazing to watch how we all came together as one to help each other..

Melissa Godwin Jacobs

My most vivid memory from Hurricane Florence, was leaving my husband and our home behind one day prior to the storm hitting the area. My husband was an emergency responder and I was six months pregnant with our son. With my husband having to stay at the station to help our community with the threat of the unknown, we made the difficult decision of having me evacuate to my parent’s house in Charlotte with our three dogs, who received the “evacuation special” at a local (and awesome) boarding facility. I will never forget leaving the house at 4 am trying to beat some of the traffic on 74, I didn’t want to leave my husband and our house not knowing what I would come home to. I cried, trying to convince him (and myself) that I should stay, knowing good and well the best thing was for me to evacuate. For almost two weeks I watched the news covering 24/7, not leaving my parent’s house, holding my breath for our friends and family as I watched the devastation unfold. Phone service was iffy, so communication with my husband was brief or non-existent for several days. After the storm passed, there was no reaching our home as all roads around and on the lake were flooded. I cried, I prayed and I wanted to go home. We had been told through social media and articles that almost all homes at Lake Waccamaw were flooded and at worse, a total loss. I prepared for the worse, knowing that if I could just get home that we could figure it all out. My husband was able to reach our home after 10 days by way of some very awesome lineman, he was able to video chat me as

Mercer family better prepared for next time

By Jefferson Weaver
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When flooding from Hurricane Florence threatened Crusoe Island, Robin Mercer made it very clear to her son, husband, brother and friends.

“We were not leaving without our animals,” she said.

Her son Evan breeds chickens that have taken multiple awards at the county fair, and raises national-level goats. Because of a protective dike around their home on Long Curve, very little water came onto the property — at first.

Evan was at a friend’s farm in Beaverdam with the family’s cattle, but there was nowhere for the goats and chickens to go. Since the animals couldn’t leave, Robin and husband Randy weren’t either.

The family farm is affected by water from two directions, Juniper Creek and the swamps of the Waccamaw River. As Florence dumped 18 inches of rain into Juniper Creek, and the Waccamaw kept rising with runoff from upstream, water began rapidly rising in the Mercer compound.

“They don’t swim very well,” she said. “We had to keep going out there and rescuing the ones who got knocked down.

“Sometimes you get a bossy goat, and they push the smaller ones around,” she explained. “The little ones got knocked down in the water, and could barely

side of the Waccamaw, where they connected with the National Guard, who helped retrieve the goats from the flooded farm.

The family’s entire place was flooded, Robin said.

“We had two and a half feet in the house, and that’s on the high ground,” she said. “There was

and couldn’t get back to higher ground.

The family completed a new barn last week, as Hurricane Dorian bore down on the south-east coast. The family was worried it would not be properly finished in time for the next storm, after having several delays due to the contractor not making the structure strong enough, Robin said.

“It should be ready now,” she said. “It ended up costing more than we planned, but I think we’re going to be all right.”

The new red barn has already become something of an attraction in Crusoe, where many homes and buildings are still in shambles after Florence. Robin said she hopes it gives people a little reassurance — as well as protecting her family’s animals.

“There’s a second floor that’s higher than the highest waterline we had before,” she said. The goats and everything can get up there. If we need to, we can as well.

“If we get another storm, it will be the same way,” Robin said. “I’m not leaving my animals.”

Robin said the family has deep roots in the Crusoe, Old Dock and Ash area, and has no plans to change that any time soon.

“People ask why don’t we just move. This is home. We aren’t going anywhere.”



Contributed photo

Evan Mercer with one of his prize goats, Bee’s Knees. The family wouldn’t leave their animals, even as more than two feet of water flooded their Crusoe home.

keep their heads up. We’d float them around and put them back up. We did that for hours.”

Robin said help finally came in from an airboat operated by a team of bowfishermen from Texas. They ferried Robin and Randy to the Brunswick County

three or four feet in the barn. At the back of the property it was over the cab of a truck — it was seven feet or more.”

The family suffered a single casualty in Florence’s flooding — one chicken was drowned when it somehow slipped off a perch

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Businesses still dealing with losses

‘Now we know the worst that can happen.’

By Diana Matthews
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Hurricane Florence wiped out or damaged businesses in areas that were not badly hit by Matthew two years earlier.

“It was horrible,” said Jennifer Holcomb, president of the Columbus Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, “but it could’ve been much worse.

“Thankfully, we’ve seen business owners show fortitude that’s so commendable. They didn’t give up.”

Mann’s Clothing was one of many downtown Whiteville shops with water standing in them after the storm.

“We’re not where we want to be,” said Terry Mann, shop owner and mayor of Whiteville, “But, being under water like the businesses were down here, to have the activity we’ve got now, to me it’s amazing.”

“When you look back on it, I think we’ve made a marvelous recovery in a little less than a year,” Mann said.

“The whole process has affected retail sales in Columbus County,” he said. The blue tarps on roofs show that, “There are people still suffering from the storm.”

“Even those that have gotten straightened out, if they weren’t covered by insurance, they’ve had

a lot of out-of-pocket expenses,” Mann said.

Looking back over the past eight or 10 months of business, Mann attributed lower sales to customers’ lack of spendable income.

Holcomb gave credit to community members for continuing to support local businesses as they worked to get over financial obstacles.

“Small businesses face many challenges even in a normal environment,” she said. “A catastrophic weather event multiplies the challenges and obstacles,” especially lost income and savings.

Holcomb agreed with Mann that, unless a business offers products and services that go up in demand after a disaster, sales go down as people spend their money on replacing lost belongings, repairing houses, staying in motels and other recovery costs.

Holcomb consulted immediately after the storm with Chamber leaders to set up a small business recovery grant program that presented business owners with \$500 checks to apply to their bills or repair expenses as they saw fit.

Some major supporters of the grants were the N.C. Community Foundation and Duke Energy, she said.

More than half the grant recipients were not Chamber members, and they represented

all areas of the county, Holcomb said.

For those with huge losses, \$500 “doesn’t even make a dent” in their needs, Holcomb said, but the grant was still “a big statement of our support and their value to the community. For businesses whose losses were smaller, \$500 can make a big difference.”

At the Chamber’s annual meeting in January, Holcomb announced a second round of check-writing based on more donations coming in from local industries and private individuals. A third round in early summer brought the number of recipients up to 78.

Tough choices

Responses to Florence included moving to another location, repairing and staying put or closing permanently.

Collier’s Jewelers once again carried out a major cleanup and reopened in the same spot. Men’s and Ladies’ Den hair salon replaced its interior porous walls with corrugated metal that can be taken down to air out the studs after a flood.

Some proprietors had no option but to stay. Badcock Furniture and More owners Joey and Amber Dinkins did a major remodel of their store just south of Soules Swamp for the second time in two years. Losses to the building and inventory from

Matthew and Florence added up “in the millions,” Joey Dinkins said, but “we own the building, so it wouldn’t make sense to move when it would probably sit there empty.”

Andy Martin, owner of NAPA Auto Parts, lost \$150,000 worth of inventory when four feet of water entered his building. But, “As a business owner, I can’t afford to leave here and secure some other property on the bypass,” he said.

Owners who stayed downtown have been vocal about the need to address infrastructure problems contributing to water backup, whether by a levee, a viaduct, drainage repair or a redesign of the Madison Street and U.S. 701 bridges spanning the swamp.

Jim Mauldin is one of several who have spoken in public meetings about the need to mitigate flooding before carrying out any more downtown development. His rental buildings in the 900 block of S. Madison Street have lost most of their tenants, but his accounting office remains in its upstairs location.

“The street in front of us is caving in,” Clark Dowless of Clark’s Auto Glass complained in January. “When it rains, the storm drain doesn’t flow. The water can’t get to the creek.”

Robin Long of The Cutting Edge salon, diagonally across the railroad tracks from Mann’s, said

she thinks all the businesses that are going to come back to downtown have already done so. The others “have been flooded too many times,” she said.

Storefronts now empty include Off Price Outlet, Big W Barbecue, two thirds of the former premises of Body Shapers Gym, Kakes by Kyle and Gurganus Feed and Grain. Some businesses that have moved into vacant spots include JACI Party and Event Rentals, Nautilus Elite Gym and Pharmacy on Main.

Both Body Shapers and Gurganus now operate out of spaces in the strip malls south of Soules Swamp.

Other locations may be a permanent loss, and smaller communities may have fewer resources to start a recovery. Crusoe residents lost their nearest gas station and now have to drive at least five miles to fuel up. Businesses in the county’s east end, which were under nine feet of water, have mostly not come back. Camlin’s Autocare Center took nine weeks of repairs to reopen. Downtown Fair Bluff remains forlorn, with most of downtown still boarded up.

Mann observed that Florence was a learning experience for businesses. “Now we know the worst that can happen,” he said. “With Matthew, we had no idea.”



A message painted on the window of Kakes By Kyle in downtown Whiteville.



Collier's Jewelers was heavily damaged.



Damage to the 24 hour side of Body Shapers.

As anniversary of Hurricane Florence neared Whiteville was focused on Dorian’s approach

By Allen Turner
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As the first anniversary of Hurricane Florence approaches, city officials in Whiteville are more occupied with preparations for Hurricane Dorian than reflecting on last year’s storm. And, because Hurricane Florence damage in so many cases mimicked destruction from Hurricane Matthew two years earlier, measuring recovery from Florence is somewhat dicey.

“I feel like Whiteville has come a long way since Florence last September,” City Manager

Darren Currie said Tuesday. “but since the Florence damage was a virtual repeat of the Matthew damage, it’s hard to pinpoint how much we have recovered from which storm.”

“The federal and state disaster money that started with Matthew wasn’t actually distributed until after Florence, so it’s difficult to say we’ve recovered ‘this’ since Florence and ‘that’ since Matthew,” he added.

The state, Currie said, is still trying to figure out the logistics of distributing some Florence-related funds. For example, the Whiteville City Hall will get a generator through Florence

funding, but the contract for the distribution of those funds still is being reviewed by the N.C. Attorney General’s office and the money has yet to be distributed.

One project attributable to Hurricane Matthew that has been completed is the repair of stormwater tile under Tram Road, which was closed for several weeks during those repairs but has since reopened.

“We’ve begun working on storm water projects but, again, I’m hesitant to label some as Florence-related and others as Matthew-related,” Currie said. “The program has been established and is up and moving ...

maybe up and crawling would be a better way to put it.”

He cited two stormwater projects in particular, one beginning at the intersection of West Walter Street and Lee Street and the other at Todd Alley, for drainage improvements.

Currie lauded the city and its citizens and businesses. “Our city has a lot of resilient people, and that shows in how quickly we have recovered from not one but two hurricanes. The businesses have done an amazing job recovering themselves instead of relying on the government. They’ve done that on their money, on their dime, not

grants. It was an amazing feat.

“We’ve had people from the state come into Whiteville since Florence who say they couldn’t even see that we were hit, people have worked so hard,” Currie continued. “That makes me feel good. We learned a lot from Matthew that helped us get through Florence and its aftermath, and we learned a lot in both of those storms that will help us get through whatever (the hurricane season) brings us. We’re relatively dry right now and can handle several inches of rain. That wasn’t the case here a year ago.”

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REMEMBER

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he got to our home and walked in the door. We were flooded by emotions, as we very incredibly lucky to only have minor water damage. Our son's nursery was fully intact and the anxiety of the unknown quickly became the reality of cleanup. I was finally able to return home (by way of a much longer, alternate route) where I have never felt so grateful. A feeling I will never forget, as I drove past utter destruction on my "home". Florence was not kind to our community and I saw and experienced true community support and love. Florence did not break us, but it brought us all closer together through some very difficult times.

Maureen Merritt

We had only lived in CoCo for a year when Florence hit so I did not know alot of people but I witnessed a community come together and I got to meet some wonderful people. I remember all the amazing people who helped others in so many ways from handing out supplies and feeding others, to cleaning up homes and yards. My children witnessed devastation like they had never seen before and a helpless feeling I think alot of us felt. We spent 8 days with no power or water but we made the best of what we had, played board games, walked around our little neighborhood and just talked to each other about everything happening. As soon as the road was passable into Whiteville We took them to help hand out supplies and food and I reminded them to never forget that God puts you where you need to be sometimes to show you have a purpose even in your own time of struggle!

Dorothy Akins

My daughter's birthday is on the 20th, and when we woke that morning after the hurricane, we still had no power. She was sad and said that all and wanted for her 7th birthday was a chocolate cake. We went driving around to get out of the stuffy house, and ended up at the North Food Lion. I didn't expect much, because there was still so much recovery and stores were just really stocking back up, but when we went to the bakery, they had a couple of cakes. My daughter was so excited that there was a chocolate one with orange flowers, and even though they were really busy trying to restock and get back to some sense of "normal", the woman who was working in there tookthe time to find out that my daughters favorite color was orange and put Happy Birthday Lily on it for her. I know that there are so many other stories out there, but this for me, as a single mom of 3 young children, it meant more to me than anything. And to further celebrate, our electricity was even restored that afternoon.

Aimee Phillips

I will never forget the look on the faces of our downtown business owners as they removed their inventory, office furniture, and investment from flooded buildings. The physical, financial, and emotional toll on our friends and neighbors in downtown Whiteville has made a lasting impression upon my heart. And, it was the motivation for our Chamber to rise up and do what we could to help. Just a few days after Florence's floodwaters devastated our business community, we launched a Small Business Recovery Fund. It's what I poured most of my time into in the following months and looking back on my career, one of the things I am most proud of.

Jennifer Holcomb

I will NEVER forget Florence. I started going into labor two days prior to the hurricane. My son was delivered the day before it start to hit. The hospital here was so good to us and made sure we had some



Contributed photo by Jody Johnson

An aerial photo shows flooding from the river through downtown Fair Bluff.



Contributed photo

A patient is taken to a Coast Guard helicopter at Columbus Regional Healthcare Center to be flown to New Hanover Regional Medical Center.



Contributed photo

Three HERR employees jumped into action when this U-Haul washed off Red Hill Road, threatening the lives of its two occupants.



Staff photo by Justin Smith

Men use a tractor to pick up equipment threatened by rising water near Crusoe.



Staff photo by Justin Smith

Crews work to construct a berm around the Duke Energy substation next to Soules Swamp in downtown Whiteville. The berm failed, flooding the substation and leaving the city without power.



Staff photo by Justin Smith

A flooded yard along N.C. 130 near Old Dock.



Contributed photo

A drone photo shows the extent of flooding in downtown Whiteville.



Staff photo by Les High

Whiteville firefighter J.D. Batchelor helps evacuees into the Whiteville Rec Center shelter after a rescue on Maultsby Drive.



Staff photo by Les High

A family awaits evacuation from their flooded mobile home on Canal Street.



Staff photo by Grant Merritt

A woman and her dog survey the flooding in downtown Whiteville.



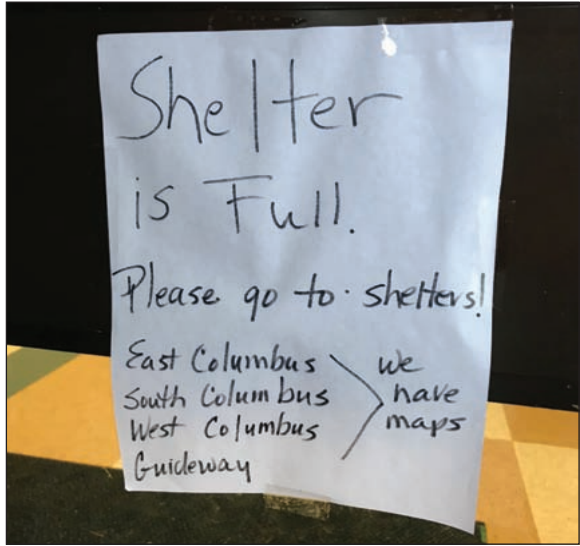
Staff photo by Les High

Flooding in downtown Whiteville.



Staff photo by Justin Smith

A cat is evacuated near Crusoe.



Staff photo by Justin Smith

The shelter at Edgewood Elementary School reached capacity, and evacuees were directed to other shelters.

REMEMBER

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where to go. We stayed with my parents since they had a generator. Let me just say taking a newborn home, your first child at that, through it all was an experience to say the least. My husband and father had to drive in the middle of the storm to our house to get formula samples.. because of course no stores were open. I had planned on nursing and even though we did, there were a couple of days we had to supplement formula. It was so scary having him drive in that, but we had to do what we could for our child. I remember sleeping as most I could with a newborn and a storm and then having to grab him and run to a safe place at 3am due to tornados touching down. After the storm came through we then had to make it to our sons first dr appt as some issues arose. The hospital was on lock down but they were so gracious to take us in and check him out for us since the dr office wasn't yet open. I remember after leaving the hospital driving by food lion who had just opened with a generator. It was a mad house.. we were all so happy to see something open. I was nervous to fight a crowd.. a hungry, stinky crowd. However, we once again I had to stop to get formula/diapers. We then returned to our own home to clean it up before bringing our new son home. There was minor water damage which we were thankful for. Needless to say for us it was unforgettable. Our son came first, no matter how scary. He made us braver then we thought. Here we are approaching my sons first birthday.. party and all and here comes another hurricane... hoping we still get to celebrate!

Emily Blackmon

Seeing members of the community and others from other states come together to save animals and the owner's joy at being reunited with her beloved animals. It took so many people to work together

Brandy Powell

I was 8 months pregnant. Hot and miserable but we were so blessed.. we played games w our 8 year old and rode around to have air in the truck when it was too hot. Lol. Aftermath was the real blessing. Hurricane relief w Baptist association.. then got in touch w some air drops... these generous sweet people were flying supplies here bc we were flooded all around basically. Donations came and came for days. And we sorted and passed out to as many people as possible.

Tiffany Buzzerio

When the Forestry service came to help clear trees and our community had pretty much already helped one another. Instead of going home the National Forest Service and National Guard pulled together to help assist at distribution sites. I had the honor of working with some awesome people. Another thing was how the flooding surpassed Hurricane Floyd flooding.

Kristin Moore

We all came together and worked. Gathered supplies and handed out to those in need. We had friends to come from Wisconsin, Georgia, and other states with semi truck loads of supplies. No one complained, we all went to work. Even children and teens came together to help clean up businesses and homes that were flooded.

Amanda Jones Williams

When our county came together regardless of race, religion, political views - just people helping their neighbor.

Andrea Brooke Coleman

‘Drinking from a firehose’ Florence was town manager’s baptism of fire

By Jefferson Weaver
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Lake Waccamaw Town Manager Gordon Hargrove had been on the job less than a month when Hurricane Florence hit in 2018.

“Like everything this first year,” he said, “It was like drinking from a fire hose.”

Florence caused more damage at the lake than any storm in recent memory. The lake went far over its banks everywhere except along the first few blocks of Lakeshore Drive, flooding homes, destroying or damaging

every pier, and leaving millions of dollars in damages.

Residents who had ridden out other storms — even with flooding — found themselves in need of rescue. Other homes were too damaged to be safe. Supplies ran perilously low, with even the police and fire department nearly running out of fuel.

“It was a tough few weeks,” Hargrove said.

Hargrove said he was exhausted by the round-the-clock operations he had to oversee in his first job as a town official.

“There was so much going on,” he said. “There were just

so many moving parts, but we have a great town, and incredible employees and volunteers. They stepped up and just kept giving.”

Since Florence struck a year ago, Hargrove said, the town has worked hard to recover and learn from the hard lessons of Florence.

“We have several projects underway to take care of some of the problems we encountered,” he said. “We’ve received all of the federal emergency money and are waiting on the state for a few more details before we can do some more.”

The damaged homes are slow-

ly but surely being repaired or in some cases, replaced.

“It’s good to see new construction,” he said. “We had a number of homeowners whose properties have flooded time and again, and they finally just gave up and demolished the old homes. The new ones are up on stilts, and look really good.”

Hargrove praised the community for its continuing efforts to repair and replace docks and piers. Repairs have at least begun on a majority of the structures, and many are complete.

“That’s going really well,” he said. “It’s good to know people

care so much about the lake. It’s a special place, a great resource, and there’s a unity of purpose in taking care of the lake.”

Florence exceeded the town’s expectations, Hargrove said, but the town is coming back stronger and better.

“The people here take pride in their community,” he said. “That shows in everything. We identified some problems in the wake of Florence, and have taken steps to solve them. I can’t say we’re always ready for every storm, but we’ll be better prepared for the next one than we were last time. This is a good, strong town.”

Most of Fair Bluff’s progress is thanks to Matthew money

By Allen Turner
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Hurricane Florence-related repairs to Fair Bluff’s Riverwalk were completed last week, marking the most tangible evidence of Fair Bluff’s recovery from the storm as the first anniversary of the flood caused by Hurricane Florence approaches.

While flood-related damage from Florence was a little greater than seen in Hurricane Matthew two years earlier, most of that damage was a duplication from the previous flood, making it difficult to assess one-year anniversary progress from Florence damages alone, said Fair Bluff Project Manager Paula Kempton, whose position on the town payroll is funded — ironically — with Hurricane Matthew relief money. Kempton has been on the job since October 2018, a month after Hurricane Florence struck.

Some recovery progress is directly related to damages from Florence, however. The nearly \$100,000 in repairs just completed on the Riverwalk came from Florence awards, and electrical work on the boardwalk still remains to be completed.

Other Florence-related items completed include repair, replacement and elevation of a generator for the water/sewer system on Railroad Street and some public utilities work.

However, most of the money spent has been invested in helping recover from Hurricane Matthew. The biggest chunk of that — millions for housing repair, elevation and buyout — has just gotten underway. Other visible multi-million dollar projects, including the new town hall/police department/visitors center, a new fire and rescue building and a new pubic works garage, are direct results of damages suffered after Hurricane Matthew, as is a planned apartment complex on the outskirts of town.

Residential housing rehabilitation related to Hurricane Florence is being handled through Columbus County government, Kempton said, while Matthew-related residential rehab was funneled through the town government. The Adams Company, a Warsaw engineering firm, is administering and overseeing housing rehab for the county and town for both Matthew and Florence.

City learns from hurricane lessons

By Jefferson Weaver
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Whiteville’s geographic location leads to some unique problems in emergency situations like hurricanes.

“We’re in a low area,” Emergency Services Director Hal Lowder said. “We’re going to flood.”

When Hurricane Matthew followed up a series of heavy summer downpours that filled Soules Swamp, Lowder said, he began working with other city officials as well as state and federal agencies to find ways to alleviate storm damage. A few of those steps were in place by Hurricane Florence dumped nearly two feet of rain on city, and sent several feet of floodwater draining through town.

“We learned from Matthew,” Lowder said. “We started lining up resources when it became apparent we were going to be in trouble with Florence. People got tired of hearing me asking for resources, but we needed everything from generators to swift water rescue teams.”

Florence found the city in bet-

ter shape, Lowder said, but not really and truly ready for another big storm.

“We had a bigger storm, and more water,” he said. “We had cleaned some drains, and Travis (Faulk) and the guys at Public Works did some incredible work right up to the start of Florence. Then they turned right back

ference, and is continuing to do so.

“A lot of the ways we’ve approached things are outside the box,” he said. “We were among the first to use the FirstNet communications system, and that came through for us during Florence.”

Lowder said the city has stepped up its hazard mitigation game, completing a major drainage project along West Walter Street and another at a trouble spot on Powell Boulevard. Three other projects were underway when the city went on alert for Hurricane Dorian.

“We have a lot going on,” he said. “That water has to go somewhere. It used to go into the swamp, but a lot of fill took place through the years. The swamp just can’t hold water like it once did, so we have to work to find ways to get it off of people’s property.”

Flooding likely will never be eliminated in Whiteville, Lowder said, but the city is taking steps to lessen the impact wherever possible.

“Every storm, we get smarter,” he said. “Florence was a great teacher.”



Staff photo by Les High

First responders in downtown Whiteville.

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Nonprofit groups continue helping local victims

By Diana Matthews
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“Anyone who has helped with hurricane disaster recovery in the past knows that it takes years, not months, to recover,” said Kip Godwin, president of Columbus County Disaster Response.

During the acute stage immediately after Florence, outside relief groups such as the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army were quick on the scene, bringing food, water and tarps.

Local individuals and organizations stepped up to meet urgent immediate needs.

Columbus Baptist Association, with assistance from area churches, distributed basic rations at the former Barefoot Church building.

Doug Sasser in Hallsboro reached out to his wide network of willing volunteers and soon had teams ripping out water-damaged materials from homes. Brendan and Angela Jones of Tabor City coordinated with fire stations to get goods to people in hard-to-reach areas.

Truckloads of needed items arrived from as far away as Texas, and volunteers sorted them into household-size packages. Atlanta’s Jewish Federation sent a load of goods after Columbus County native Heidi Enzor mobilized donors to help.

From rescue to recovery

Long-term recovery has mainly been carried out by local volunteers, however.

“Our effectiveness is because we collaborate,” said Wallyce Todd, director of Community CPR, which stands for Connecting People and Resources.

Cooperation between Baptists, Catholics, a furniture manufacturer and local donors provided about 75 households with needed mattresses, bed frames and bedding, Todd said, and she expects to receive another 30 mattress and springs sets soon to carry on the “redemptive sleep project.”

As she walked though CCPR headquarters, she named Catholic Charities, Lutheran Services, Praying Pelicans and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as groups she has worked with repeatedly. She pointed out stacks of building supplies donated by Lowe’s and Painters First Source, ready to be put to use.

Todd constantly works with Godwin at Columbus County Disaster Response, to get rebuilding jobs done. CCDDR receives money donations and puts volunteers to work, while CCPR gathers physical materials and screens applicants.

“We were serving one to four families a week before Florence, and that went up to 30-40 a week after Florence,” Todd said. Almost a year later, CCPR is receiving 25 applications a week, 75 percent of them Florence-related. Drop-in hours are Tuesday and Thursday, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the office on East Walter Street in Whiteville.

Unmet needs

CCDDR and CCPR “could not do without” donations from groups such as BB&T’s Lighthouse Foundation, Rotary, the Columbus County Community Foundation and monthly partners such as Grace Episcopal Church, Todd said.

Although Todd finds government aid less expeditious than charitable help in many cases, she has also seen public agencies

such as HUD, NC Works, Hope for NC and the Cape Fear Council of Governments work effectively with private charities.

She tells of a family of five forced to live in their van, then in a mold- and mildew-infested house, after their rented home was destroyed by Florence. The environment was making the children sick, but, with the father’s job lost, “they had no other place to go,” she said.

“After months of hitting obstacle after obstacle,” Todd said, about eight government agencies, church groups and private individuals worked together, and within a week and a half got the family into a recently renovated home, paid their rental deposit, set up electric service and brought in furniture and bedding.

“That family no longer felt so isolated and uncared for,” Todd said.

“People still need help,” she continued. “There’s a lot of post-traumatic stress.” Todd and Godwin are heading up a long-term support group for people who want to meet and encourage one another. Meetings will be held in four locations around the county.

People we count on

Established local nonprofits work every day to meet long-term needs, and their mission was complicated by Florence. Staff had to deal with the double challenges of helping clients while their own facilities were damaged and lacking electric power.

Carol Caldwell, executive director of the Columbus County DREAM Center, said 20 volunteers distributed food, water, hygiene items, clothing for every age range, cleaning supplies, blankets and tarps during the weeks after the storm.

A major difficulty, Caldwell said, was that all the center’s programming had to cease or be delayed for weeks. Many people who had signed up for parenting classes or other programs became displaced and were difficult to reach, and the center “had to play catch up” in order to meet goals they had committed to when accepting grants, she said.

“As we look around,” Caldwell said, “there is still a great deal of work to do.” With many people still displaced, the DREAM Center continues working to connect people with resources. Nonprofits located in flood zones need to raise their buildings, she said. And, almost a year later, “We still see trash from the storm.”

Two things Caldwell said people can learn from Florence are to listen to local weather predictions to be better prepared and to “evacuate when told to do so.”

Families First Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services saw an increase in requests for help after the hurricane, said Vickie Pait, executive director. Repairs to the nonprofit’s headquarters took four months. Thrift store merchandise was destroyed by flooding, and the lip-synch fundraiser was cancelled.

Boys and Girls Homes evacuated about 200 residents before the storm. The campus suffered major, expensive damage to cottages and educational buildings. Ray Cockrell, development director, said the Homes’ supporters worked hard to repair the damage and provide generators for future storms.

Samaritan’s Purse has brought 242 volunteers to repair and rebuild



Staff photo by Justin Smith

Katrina Bullock pulls a hand-operated forklift full of donated supplies at Community CPR.



Staff photos by Justin Smith and Grant Merritt

Left: Volunteers and donors pray outside Community CPR. Right: Martha Sibley-Jett of Connecticut paints a Farmers Union home repaired by Samaritan’s Purse.



Staff photo by Grant Merritt

Volunteers pack emergency supplies for the drive-up distribution center at the former Barefoot Church in Whiteville.

homes in the Lumberton/Whiteville area, said Jackie Williams, case worker for the ministry. That number will continue to grow, said Williams, because, “We are committed to helping families return home. Recovery from Hurricane Florence will take years.

“Samaritan’s Purse has now transitioned from disaster relief to rebuild and recovery,” Williams said.

Samaritan’s Purse has committed to 31 home repairs, 18 new home builds and 30 new manufactured mobile homes in the Whiteville/Lumberton area, said Williams. “In total, Samaritan’s Purse plans to help more than 310 families return home.”

Williams encouraged homeowners needing assistance to call her at 840-3119 and start the application process.

Local volunteers are welcome to take part a day or two at a time



Staff photo by Justin Smith

These teens were among nearly 300 Mission Serve volunteers helping in the county in 2019.

and can register at spvolunteer.org.

“Many homeowners feel like they’ve been forgotten after the storm,” Williams said. “When Samaritan’s Purse comes alongside them and helps them recover, they

are overwhelmed with thanks. They realize they are not alone.

“Seeing the smiles on their faces as we welcome them home is something I will never forget.”

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Staff photo by Justin Smith

Loretta McCumbee pulls her jon boat down Dock Road after evacuating her Crusoe Island home due to rising floodwaters following Hurricane Florence.

McCumbee fled rising waters ‘I couldn’t carry everything I wanted to’

By Justin Smith
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As Loretta McCumbee stood last week in her Crusoe Island backyard, she couldn’t believe the run that leads to the nearby Waccamaw River was so dry that the dirt was cracking.

“But don’t underestimate Mother Nature,” she said.

Nearly a year ago, in the days following Hurricane Florence, the water in that spot would have been above her head.

McCumbee had planned to ride out Florence in her home with her rescue cats. Her husband Gary was gone much of the time because of his work with Brunswick Electric Membership Corporation.

“I slept probably two hours in two days,” she said. “My mind would not rest because I was watching this water come up over an inch an hour.”

McCumbee remembers how quiet and dark the nights were without power

and “the total blackness of all that water and not knowing what’s in that water as it’s rising.”

As the water crept up her doorsteps, McCumbee went into “rescue mode for things in the house,” moving everything she could to the second floor.

On the Monday after the storm, Gary insisted that they evacuate as the water crept up their doorstep.

Loretta loaded her cats onto a Coast Guard boat and packed the family’s jon boat with clothes and essentials, along with photos and irreplaceable items.

“I couldn’t carry everything I wanted to,” McCumbee said. She remembered her husband saying, “The boat’s going to sink, you’ve got so much stuff in here.”

The McCumbees navigated their jon boat down Crusoe Island Road, then Dock Road until they reached dry land. Friends helped them load the boat onto a trailer as Coast Guardsman and other first responders dashed out to

lead other evacuations.

Nine days passed before the McCumbees could return home. When they surveyed the damage, they found that the floodwaters had destroyed their heating and AC units, duct work and a refrigerator and freezer in an outbuilding. But compared to many of their neighbors, they were lucky.

“It was devastating to look and see the homes that were destroyed,” McCumbee said. “We had neighbors whose houses are torn down. They lost almost everything they had. I spoke to several of them and they said they weren’t coming back. They couldn’t do it again. A lot of these folks have done this three times.”

While some of her neighbors didn’t come back after Florence, family connections keep Loretta and her husband in Crusoe, a community where McCumbee says everyone looks out for each other.

“I just love it out here,” she said.

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