

HURRICANE IRMA

Bonita landmarks weathered Irma

FEMA town hall meeting
When: 6 p.m. Friday
Where: First Presbyterian Church, 9751 Bonita Beach Road
What: FEMA representatives will be at the meeting to discuss FEMA eligibility and answer questions.
Needed to apply for FEMA aid: Social Security number, daytime telephone number, current mailing address, address and ZIP code of the damaged property, and private insurance information if available.
Applicants can pre-register online at www.DisasterAssistance.gov or by calling 1-800-621-FEMA (3362).

Historic resort, longtime restaurant just cleaning up

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Although parts of Bonita Springs remained flooded Tuesday — more than a week after Hurricane Irma roared across Southwest Florida — some of the city’s venerable institutions weathered the storm.

The Shangri-La Springs, a historic resort constructed in 1921, sustained “zero damage” to its building in downtown Bonita Springs, said General Manager Lee Bellamy, and the property’s two 80-year-old Mysore fig trees will pull through, too.

See BONITA, Page 4A



The Shangri-La Springs, a historic resort in downtown Bonita Springs, appears undamaged by Hurricane Irma.
PATRICK RILEY/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

Red Cross helps with stress of evacuees

Mental health pros move through crowds at shelters

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Shawn and Mary Moore have weathered tough times in their 25-year marriage, all of which helped the couple manage staying in a shelter before Hurricane Irma ravaged Southwest Florida.

Mary Moore, 41, has epilepsy. In 2012 the couple were in a car accident, and she faced a series of surgeries to piece her shattered body back together.

Among the myriad services the Red Cross provides in times of disasters is stress management assistance in shelters for evacuees from hurricanes, tornadoes, fires and other events.

“They all look out for one another,” said Mary Moore, of North Fort Myers. “They keep telling me to keep my chin up and it’s going to get better.”

All of the shelters opened for Irma have licensed mental health professionals to circulate among the residents. The counselors offer ways to help them cope with the disruption in their lives.

At the Estero Community Park and Recreation Center, half a dozen of the mental health professionals were on hand Tuesday for any of the 463 evacuees. The number has held steady under 500 individuals, said Bob Wallace, a Red Cross spokesman.

“We have counselors roaming in to make contact and visit with the people, and they are welcome to approach us, and we counsel staff,” said Janet Michel, one of the counselors. “Our staff goes through a great deal of strain working 12-hour days.”

People bring their issues with them to the shelter, and those issues don’t go away, said Michel, of Fort Myers Beach.

Stress management focuses on what an individual needs at the moment, which could be medication, food, help contacting a loved one in a distant place, or similar “right now” issues, said Peggy McGee-Smith, the lead disaster mental health counselor in the Estero shelter. “Things are going on in people’s lives, and we give them support and listen.”

Another focus is to distract the evacuees from where they are now, she said.

The Church of the Brethren runs a children’s disaster service and went to the shelter with clowns and balloon makers to help children cope with their anxiety.

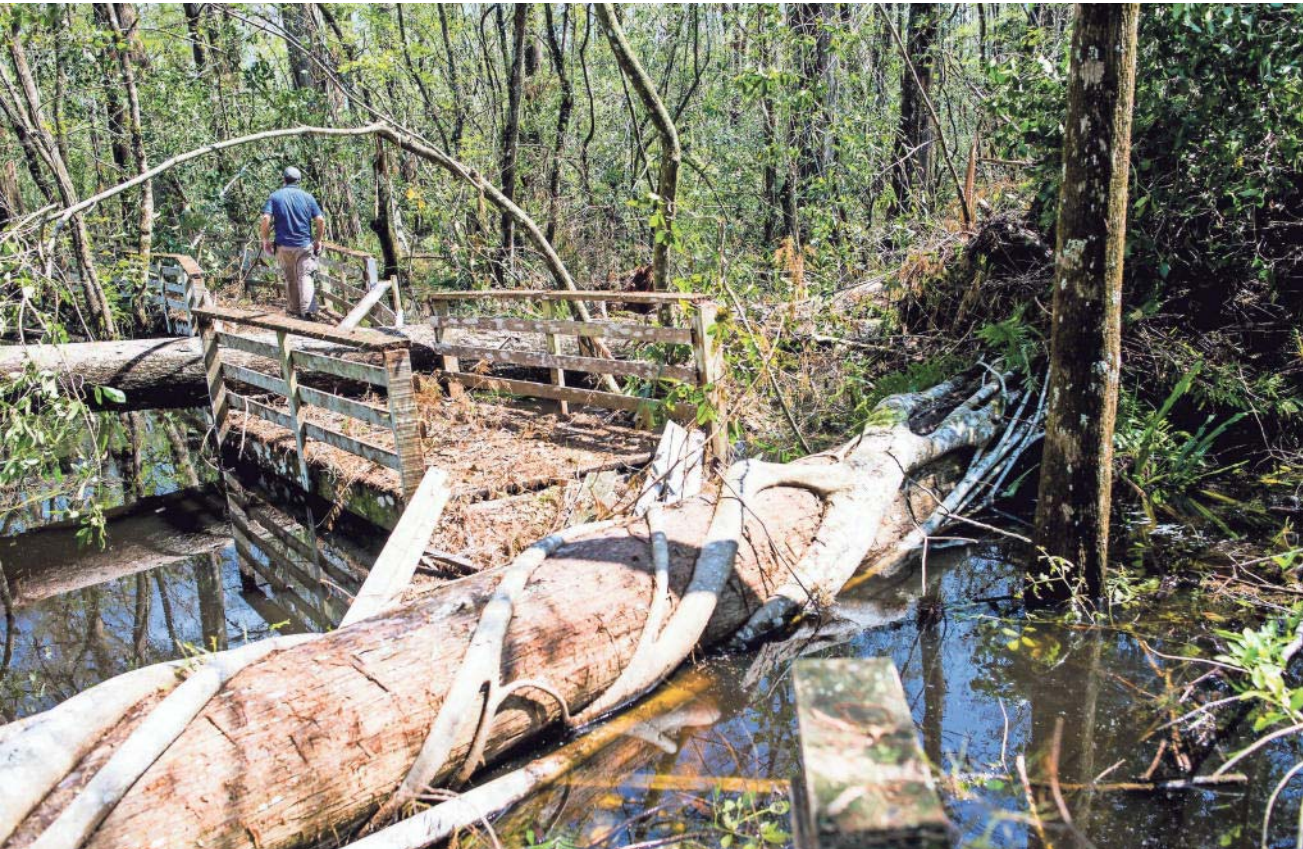
Some people who come into the shelter offer to help with chores, and that’s a good way to get through shelter life.

“They feel productive,” Michel said. “They feel useful.”

Shawn Moore said the Red Cross volunteers have been wonderful and helpful. He spoke to his landlord and found out the manufactured home that he and his wife rented was still under water.

“We couldn’t go back there if we wanted to,” he said.

See IRMA STRESS, Page 6A



Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary director Jason Lauritsen gives a tour Friday to show damage from Hurricane Irma.
PHOTOS BY JUSTIN GILLILAND/SPECIAL TO THE NAPLES DAILY NEWS

Forest is damaged

Irma took down big trees at Corkscrew Swamp site

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Although hammered by Hurricane Irma, the ancient forest at Audubon’s Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary will recover and survive, as it has for many generations and scores of hurricane strikes.

The famous ghost orchid tree is still standing after Irma’s eyewall tore through the 13,000-acre sanctuary in Golden Gate Estates, but two landmark trees were lost, and the 2.25-mile boardwalk was heavily damaged by many other fallen trees.



Lauritsen walks on a fallen tree Friday. Two landmark trees were lost in the sanctuary during Irma, and the 2.25-mile boardwalk was damaged by other downed trees.



See a video of damage to the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

naplesnews.com

See FOREST, Page 4A

House will address hurricane problems

Committee will examine state’s response to Irma

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TALLAHASSEE — A new Florida House committee ordered to review how the state responded to Hurricane Irma will propose legislation requiring all nursing homes and assisted-living facilities have a backup source of electricity.

Eight people died after experiencing oven-like conditions in a Hollywood nursing home, and House Speaker

Richard Corcoran said Tuesday the legislation is at the top of the agenda for the Select Committee on Hurricane Response and Preparedness. The panel will file a bill similar to one filed by the state Senate.

“I’m sure one of our colleagues will run that legislation and that legislation will be discussed,” said Corcoran, R-Land O’ Lakes. “Literally, it will be discussed in the next two weeks, and it was on the list we sent out to our members.”

Corcoran wants to pay for some of the changes by cutting special projects from the state budget. He said this year’s \$83

See HOUSE, Page 6A



“Sorry out of service,” reads a sign covering one of the pump handles at a gas station.
JOSHUA L. JONES, AP

HURRICANE IRMA



Handrails and side rails were damaged on numerous sections of the boardwalk in Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, but the boardwalk still is passable on some of those sections. JUSTIN GILLILAND/SPECIAL TO THE NAPLES DAILY NEWS

Forest

Continued from Page 3A

The sanctuary may have seen some of Irma’s worst winds on the so-called dirty side of the hurricane.

“We were on the northeast edge of that wall when it first came in. The back side wasn’t so bad. By the time it got here, the back side had disintegrated quite a bit,” said Jason Lauritsen, director of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, off Immokalee Road in northern Collier County.

Many massive bald cypress trees, one at least 400 years old and more than 6 feet in diameter, fell across the wooden boardwalk that allows visitors to get close to rare and unique Florida flora and fauna in the last remaining old-growth bald cypress forest in the world.

“We have seven locations where massive trunks have fallen all the way through the boardwalk. That’s major repair sections,” Lauritsen said.

Lauritsen hasn’t counted the numerous sections of boardwalk where just the handrails or side rails are down but the boardwalk is still passable.

“There are probably two dozen, if not more, like that,” he said, referring to a section of wooden railing where a pine tree fell near the Blair Audubon Center, the nature store and exhibit area that serves as the gateway to the boardwalk.

The goal is to have at least the mile-long short loop of the boardwalk open in a couple of weeks. Although five trees fell on this bypass stretch, none broke through the walk’s planks of ipe, a durable Brazilian hardwood.

“Right now our boardwalk’s closed. It’s been closed since the Thursday before the hurricane hit. Because of the extent of the damage on the boardwalk itself, we’re looking at at least two more weeks before we open to a limited traffic and probably a month before we can open the whole thing just because of the damage.”

Discovered just a decade ago at the sanctuary, its ever-popular super ghost orchid rode out the storm from its spot about 50 feet up in an old-growth bald cypress tree and about 100 feet away from the main boardwalk loop.

“They’re calling in and texting in to ask about the ghost orchid. Everybody’s worried about that tree and the flowers on it,” Lauritsen said. “It’s certainly nice to know that people care and pay attention.”

Among the sanctuary’s casualties in the storm were two of its historic landmark old-growth bald cypress trees. A few years ago, the sanctuary marked a dozen of these distinctive living sentinels in an effort to help visitors who opted for self-guided tours on the boardwalk to notice the forest and the value of the forest, Lauritsen said.

“They’re not necessarily the 12 largest. They’re some of the largest. They have stories to tell, and we’ve named them, and we’ve signed them, so they’re things people will notice,” he said. “Two of those, two of the 12, fell in the storm — the DaVinci Tree and the Guy Bradley Tree.”

Named after naturalists, the massive trees will remain where they fell, providing a nursery for future trees and wildlife that can grow out of them or live in them.

The damage done 57 years ago by Hurricane Donna can still be seen on some of the massive trees that had as much as 30 feet of their tops sheared off



Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary director Jason Lauritsen holds a rare twisted airplant species found recently. Lauritsen gave a tour of the sanctuary Friday to show damage from Hurricane Irma. JUSTIN GILLILAND/SPECIAL TO THE NAPLES DAILY NEWS

“We have seven locations where massive trunks have fallen all the way through the boardwalk. That’s major repair sections.”

JASON LAURITSEN
DIRECTOR OF CORKSCREW SWAMP SANCTUARY

in that benchmark storm. That 1960 hurricane didn’t leave as much for Irma to damage a half-century later.

“The storm and the winds we had here, we didn’t have 30 extra feet of trees. We had some that were over 100 feet, but none that were at the 130, 140 that they can get to. That again is because of Donna. Donna changed the landscape,” Lauritsen said. “When Donna came and smashed big pieces of boardwalk, as well, you just saw the power of that storm, and it left a lot of nursery logs you can see laden with ferns and other cypress trees growing up out of them.”

None of the debris will be removed from the sanctuary, and staff will attach fallen orchids onto other trees. With the exception of one or two of the larger trunks, which will be taken inside the center for educational purposes, the trees and debris on the boardwalk will be pushed into the swamp.

“We don’t harvest these for any commercial purposes. This will be a nursery. It’s a natural process. It’s a rare event, but it’s a natural event,” Lauritsen said.

The largest cypress to fall on the boardwalk is a specimen of about 20 feet in circumference and more than 6 feet in diameter wrapped in a strangler fig. Bees can be seen flying in and out of an eye-shaped cavity in a fractured branch that is now just a few feet above the swamp in the Lettuce Lakes strand of the sanctuary.

“This tree was known to us as the Bee Tree,” Lauritsen said. “It has a healthy honeybee hive in one of the canopy branches. Of course, opportunities like this are unique because you have a chance to look into the canopy of the tree at eye level and see what’s growing in

there and what kinds of insects are present as well.”

The top of this more than 400-year-old tree was knocked off by Donna, most likely triggering the massive tree’s heart rot, which made it weak enough that it could not withstand the force of Irma.

“It’s dealt with a lot of storms. This is a natural event. What makes it the most vulnerable is the fact that it’s the only forest like it left. So these kinds of events cost a little ecologically,” Lauritsen said. “The biomass is still in the canopy. It’s going to enrich the peat. It’s going to enrich the water.”

An immediate positive outcome from Irma’s destruction is that a plant species not seen before at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary was spotted Friday morning by George Wilder, botanist and herbarium curator at the Naples Botanical Garden.

“We came here 159 times and never saw it, but today I saw it because it had been blown from high up out of a tree, I guess, and was on the ground,” Wilder said. “It’s called twisted airplant. I’ve never seen it here. It’s normally a coastal species.”

Wilder and Jean McCollom, who retired from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, recently completed a flora survey documenting more than 750 plants representative of the biological diversity at Corkscrew, where they used to work years ago.

“Of the 700 species we found, this was not one of them,” McCollom said of the twisted airplant. “This is exciting.”

Standing outside the sanctuary’s nature center Friday, McCollom reiterated that the local environment will recover, despite taking a good beating.

“People don’t like to hear this right after a hurricane, but this is perfectly natural, so to speak,” she said. “Audubon has a sanctuary in South Carolina that was hit by Hurricane Hugo (in 1989), and we did a lot of work on that. We took a field trip around 10 years later to show hurricane damage, and we could see it, but nobody else could. It’s one of those things. These swamps recover. They’ve been formed by hurricanes. That’s part of their history. It looks horrible, and individual trees we’ll cry over, but you know it is a natural event.

“Now, repairing the boardwalk may be another thing.”

To make donations to help repair the boardwalk, visit the sanctuary’s website at <http://corkscrew.audubon.org/irma>.

Bonita

Continued from Page 3A

“They just need to get cleaned up,” Bellamy said of the famous trees, which tower over the property’s courtyard and had some of their mighty branches mangled by the powerful winds.

“They’re going to be fine. ... Didn’t damage the root system at all.”

The giant Mysore fig trees are two of only four in all of Southwest Florida, said John Domanski, the facilities and maintenance manager for the property.

That number declined even further when the ferocious hurricane uprooted a large Mysore fig tree at the Edison & Ford Winter Estates in Fort Myers. Another — bigger — Mysore fig tree at the Estates survived the storm.

“These are pretty strong trees,” Domanski said.

The resort suffered “a complete loss to very few trees,” and its organic garden survived the storm, too, sustaining only minimal damage, Bellamy said.

“We really didn’t lose anything,” he said. “It’s just a lot of cleanup.

“We were very fortunate.”

The hotel, which continues to conduct renovations inside its main house, now plans to bring in some heavier machinery, including a crane, to finish cleaning the courtyard.

“Now it’s time to bring in the big boys,” Bellamy said.

As has been the case throughout Bonita Springs, the resort’s nearby waterway — the Oak Creek — rose threateningly high after the storm. But unlike other properties around town, the hotel was spared any flood damage.

The creek’s water rose between 5 and 7 feet, Bellamy said.

“We couldn’t access the south side of the property on either our bridges,” he said.

About a mile north on Old 41 Road, another longtime Bonita Springs establishment was spared the worst.

Buffalo Chips, which turned 35 years old this month, sustained some roof damage to the restaurant and a trailer behind it, where some of the employees live, said General Manager Sally Majestic, but it was open for business again in less than a week.

“This place has been here forever,” said Majestic, who is the cousin of Chip Greenwood, the restaurant owner. “We are really counting our blessings.”

After widespread flooding in the area just weeks before the hurricane hit, the restaurant got rid of some nearby trees, Majestic said.

“We had a couple of big trees that were already coming out from the flooding that we were able to get a tree service out before the hurricane to get that cut down,” she said. “Because that was, like, right by our lines, our power lines; that would’ve been a nightmare.”

And in another stroke of luck, the restaurant’s motel housed some Florida Power & Light employees who were able to restore power to the business early last week, enabling it to reopen Thursday.

“We were lucky that it wasn’t a big issue and it wasn’t the trees or anything involved,” Majestic said.

The restaurant’s motel blocked off its rooms online for the time being to keep the bulk of the 11 rooms available for cleanup crews or residents in need of temporary lodging, Majestic said.

Ever since the hurricane hit, the motel has been slammed with requests for rooms.

“We have so many people in this area,” she said. “So we’re closing down all our outside reservations and only taking care of our community.”

“This place has been here forever. We are really counting our blessings.”

SALLY MAJESTIC
GENERAL MANAGER
OF BUFFALO CHIPS RESTAURANT