TREASURE COAST REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL

MEMORANDUM

To: Council Members
AGENDA ITEM 6

From: Staff
Date: July 10, 2020

Subject: Hurricane Shelter Planning Approaches During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Background

Local government officials and emergency managers protect community populations during hurricanes and other emergencies by issuing direction for sheltering. These options may include public or special needs, traveling to friends and family, or sheltering in place. Community leaders and emergency managers are rethinking public hurricane sheltering spaces with the onset of Coronavirus (COVID-19). Floorplans and layouts of shelters will be scrutinized to provide appropriate social distancing between families, access to water fountains, bathrooms, and community areas will all be concerns should the use of shelters be needed due to a hurricane or other emergency occurring in conjunction with current response to COVID-19. Under normal circumstances public and special needs shelter capacity is more than sufficient in counties in our Region for local populations. However, with the ease of transmission of this virus to persons in close proximity, specific planning to protect populations in shelters is of utmost priority to prevent further spreading in a mass gathering area.

Public shelter space is almost exclusively provided within schools as they are hardened buildings usually within moderate distances from most households, however, during the past 3 active hurricanes an average of only 32% of public shelter space was used by the public. Potentially, the fear of contracting COVID-19 may push that figure lower still. Special Needs sheltering is essential in communities to protect our most vulnerable residents compromised by illness, dependence on medical equipment, staff, or caregivers during emergencies. Special needs shelter space, which requires annual registration, is generally near capacity. Again, the impacts of the virus may alter the use of these safe spaces with lower special needs registrations in these facilities placing people at higher risk. Sheltering in place is strongly promoted by the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) and local emergency managers and has been increasingly recommended over the last decade, however, depending on storm attributes, life safety becomes more relevant if people are not seeking shelter when needed due to fear of contracting the virus. A unique set of assumptions governs preparedness actions to ensure continued public safety whether persons are utilizing shelters, sheltering in place, or traveling to safe havens.
In addition, advance planning by departments is necessary to ensure supply availability through current vendors given labor shortages, and the slowdown of product manufacturing and transportation services. Local government emergency operations response and short-term recovery plans establish Points of Distribution (POD) sites that provide residents basic “must have” items such as water, ice, and food in the immediate period following disasters and should provide community populations safe access to PODs to retrieve these essential items. Strategic safety measures in the distribution of essential items will be needed to prevent further spread of COVID-19.

Analysis

The State of Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Florida Department of Health (DOH), and the county emergency management offices are working to update State and local shelter plans in response to COVID-19 to provide for safe sheltering in preparation for what the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is predicting to be an above average active hurricane season.

The intention of this informational item is to brief Council on the status of shelter capacity in the region, current emergency management approaches to ensure safe use of public and special needs shelters, and safe conduct of POD sites and preparedness activities and approaches each county in our region is taking to ensure the safety of residents and visitors during and immediately after a hurricane or other emergency during this Coronavirus Pandemic.

Recommendation

For informational purposes only.

Council Action – July 17, 2020

Council received a PowerPoint presentation from Kathryn Boer, Emergency Programs Director, Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council (copy attached).

Attachments