

EDITORIAL

Controlling re-entry post-Irma was for everyone's benefit

We are just past the halfway point of the six planned feedback meetings being conducted by county officials to gather resident feedback about how the Keys could have better prepared and recovered from Sept. 10's Hurricane Irma.

The panel-own half meetings, conducted so far in Key Largo, Islamorada, Marathon and Key West, have been mostly productive and civil, but keep in mind county officials have yet to get in front of the hardest-hit residents, those in the Lower Keys. These discussions are likely to be most agitated and challenging for county Director of Strategic Planning Kimberly Matthews and Emergency Management Director Marty Sciarretto.

Even without these meetings, we learned first hand what a Category 4 hitting the Keys looks like in the modern era, and that will help first responders, utilities, government officials and residents prepare for the next one, which hopefully is far, far in the future.

Regardless of one's own personal situation, we should all be proud and impressed with how the county, state and feds responded to the powerful storm. And Sciarretto has both quick to acknowledge that "there are always areas for improvement."

The logical topic has been and will likely continue to be re-entry. Debris removal, availability of fuel and communication to both those who stayed behind and those who headed the call to evacuate have been frequently brought up too, but residents have been passionate about wanting access to their homes sooner than they were able.

The conditions of the county on Sept. 10 was as if a bomb had been dropped. I.R.S. 1 was largely impassable, power lines were strewn throughout residential roads, sewers were non-functional, harmful debris was everywhere, and there were only a limited amount of first responders in place. The county delayed letting residents and later tourists, back into the Keys for both safety and logistical reasons.

Prior hazards entailed while electricity was being restored to storm-damaged homes. If folks were allowed earlier re-entry it would slow the restoration process. "The quicker we let people in, the longer it takes to restore electricity," Sciarretto said.

If earlier re-entry were allowed, those trying to survey their home for damage would have been on their own. Residents who injured themselves seriously on their property, with so much dangerous sharp metal present, wouldn't have had any 911 support or any responders around to transport them to a hospital on the mainland.

While not as widely concerning in these meetings as re-entry, it's fair to say that allowing visitors in on Oct. 1, the day Monroe County officials decided the Florida Keys would "officially" open to tourists, was controversial if not outright premature. But while visitors didn't exactly blow our doom down that day or shortly thereafter, they arrived to a less-than-ready area.

We understand and support the county's need to regulate the critical tourism component of our economy, but that decision wasn't in sync with the same caution applied for resident re-entry.

Ultimately, it was the county's responsibility to protect its citizens, and the Keys were too dangerous for people to return after the storm passed. Prudent living conditions were everywhere and remain that way in some areas of the Lower Keys today. Recoveries would have likely been under-prepared with essential supplies. And, again, there were few in-calling options for replacement.

We understand residents who say the next time they will not evacuate because re-entry was so taxing. But, access to basic services and utilities will be limited for non-evacuees as for early returnees. And while those that didn't evacuate may have come through this major storm's crisis hairs mostly unscathed, the next time may well be a different outcome. — Keynoter



CELEBRATING OUR PAST

KEYS HISTORY

Remember disco? Or have you decided that musical era is better left forgotten? This is the Boca Chica Bar on U.S. 1 on Stock Island on July 15, 1977.

Monroe County Public Library

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WINN-DIXIE TO RETURN

As you know, our store in Marathon received significant damage from Hurricane Irma. Although the store is currently closed, we've learned that this store is an absolute priority to Winn-Dixie and our local store team.

While the store is closed, we're taking this opportunity to not only repair what was damaged but specifically remodel this location in order to provide enhancements to better fit our customers' needs. Please know that we hear your concerns, and we're taking important steps to bring an improved shopping experience to Marathon this fall.

We're proud to be a part of this community and we are eager to start seeing our loyal customers back in our store. In the interim, we invite our customers to shop our Winn-Dixie store on Big Pine Key, where they can find the same great products and store experiences they've come to expect.

We will certainly share additional updates on our progress as soon as we are able to do so. Thank you for your continued pa-



This is what the Winn-Dixie's deli/deli bar will look like when it reopens, the company says.

Winn-Dixie

— Eddie Garcia, senior vice president, Winn-Dixie, Melbourne

PROTECT BOATERS

For many boaters, the term "salvage claim" may be an unfamiliar one, but for me it was a costly reality that I experienced last fall.

On Sept. 10, Hurricane

Irma made landfall on the Keys, damaging many boats, including my own. My boat was secured in a Marathon marina and although it fared better than others, the hurricane blew some of the hatches off and brought a significant amount of salt, allowing water to get caught in the bow of my vessel. Approximately four

weeks later, I decided to call a maritime salvage and towing company to help remove the excess seawater. To be clear, my boat was still in the marina and was not heading to simply had rain water in the bow. I called a particular company because I had a meeting with them and they pumped the water out and towed it to a nearby marina

as I could have it looked at. My boat was somewhere near drying and was not in any peril when they arrived. They simply brought the pump, plugged it into the water. I later received a bill for \$12,750 because the company said my boat was taking on water and was therefore a salvage claim. The cost

was shocking and the company's rationale couldn't be farther from the truth.

Thankfully, legislation regarding these companies to give a written estimate before providing service is making its way through the Florida Legislature now. The current lack of consumer protections encourages a form of modern-day piracy that should not be allowed, and I'm thankful that legislative leaders are taking action. I urge you to join the in supporting these reasonable protections for Florida's boaters.

— Ron Hodson, Marathon

PROFESSION

Letters of local interest are welcome, but subject to editing and condensing. There is a 400-word limit. Letters bearing an individual's name. Opinions do not represent publication of the KeyNoter unless otherwise stated. Anonymous letters will not be published. Include a daytime phone number which will not be published where you may be reached if there are questions about your correspondence.

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