

Coastal North Carolina has long been a remarkable destination for companies, vacationers and new residents. In light of Hurricane Florence, that hasn't changed. In fact, the region is emerging from the historic storm stronger than ever — with new and more resilient infrastructure, coordinated planning and an engaged leadership that is keenly focused on the future.

Since Colonial times, Southeastern North Carolina has been the state's "gateway to the world's economy." Recent years have seen significant upgrades to our port facilities, bringing new amenities to facilitate global commerce here and beyond. Today, our region's economy and business landscape are aligned with international markets more closely than ever – which means new jobs, businesses and investment in sectors from advanced manufacturing and alternative energy to logistics and value-added agribusiness.

No weather event can dampen our region's appeal as a fast-growing backdrop for 21st century businesses. If anything, the recent storm has proven our capacity to overcome challenges and embrace opportunities to identify and eliminate vulnerabilities.

No region in the world can avoid inevitable disruptions due to natural or man-made disasters. What sets coastal North Carolina apart is the close cooperation among public, private and voluntary leaders to move decisively into recovery and rebuilding mode. Hurricane Florence was a valuable showcase of our excellent first-responders, elected officials, government agencies and community organizations. Amid the alarming images of destruction and dislocation, the world saw a resilient region eager to turn tragedy into triumph.

Economic development professionals also took center stage in the comeback, moving quickly to minimize unnecessary disruption to the economy. As local and regional leaders, we immediately came together to assess damage to critical infrastructure and move accurate information into the hands of state and federal officials. Our efforts helped speed the arrival of resources from Raleigh and Washington.

While many of our residents and businesses continue to struggle with recovery, the region is moving ahead with hope, unity and gratitude. We're working hard, working smart and working together to make our region and its economy better than ever.

Now is the time to be bullish on Southeastern North Carolina!

Best wishes,

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Wilmington and other towns became islands when water from the Cape Fear River overflowed its banks after Hurricane Florence made landfall at Wrightsville Beach. Today, the Port City is coming back strong.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

In coastal Carolina, organizations come together to put Hurricane Florence behind them.

When the Category 1
Hurricane Florence
made landfall at
Wrightsville Beach
Sept. 14 and worked its
way inland, many towns
found themselves cut
off from most of the
state by epic flooding.

As the clouds parted, businesses, health care providers, government agencies, schools and universities came together to lift up their communities and put them on the road to recovery.

"Times like this bring out the best in people," says Jose V. "Zito" Sartarelli, chancellor of UNC Wilmington, which

BUSINESSES AND NONPROFITS STEP UP TO HELP BRUNSWICK COUNTY RECOVER

orth Carolina's southeastern corner had barely recovered from the ravages of Hurricane Matthew in 2016 when Hurricane Florence drifted ashore on Sept. 14.

In an Oct. 11 letter to N.C. Secretary of Commerce Tony Copeland, Steve Yost, executive director of the Southeast Economic Development Partnership, outlined the many ways Hurricane Florence affected the 18-county region and asked for help to the tune of at least \$75 million in loans, grants and funding.

By the time the damage had been assessed and requests for aid processed, local communities had sprung into action to serve immediate needs and set the stage for recovery.

Brunswick Electric Membership Corp. was one of the first responders, jumping in to restore power to as many of its members as possible, according to BEMC spokesperson Heather Holbrook. At the peak, 82,911 of BEMC's customers were without electricity. More than 550 employees, contractors and crews from as far away as Minnesota worked to restore power.

"BEMC is also committed to helping to meet the needs of those in our community who were negatively affected by the storm," Holbrook says.

The electric cooperative designated two local nonprofits as recipients of a matching grant opportunity through CoBank, a cooperative bank serving agribusinesses, rural infrastructure providers and Farm Credit associations throughout the United States. CoBank pledged \$150,000 in funding to match customers' disaster relief contributions.

On Oct. 9, BEMC and CoBank presented \$100,000 to Columbus County Disaster Response Inc. and Brunswick Family Assistance. The nonprofit that provides services for low-income residents put its share to use quickly.

"After Hurricane Florence, we became the point of contact for all of the disaster relief efforts in Brunswick County," says Executive Director Stephanie Bowen. "Immediately after the storm passed, we set up a collection point and began receiving donations ... from all over the country."

The six-employee agency used space at the Brunswick Beacon newspaper in Shallotte for collection and distribution.

Bowen and her staff used monetary contributions to purchase clothing and food. They set up 18 mobile distribution sites around the county and in the first two weeks after the storm made deliveries to each of those sites twice a day.

"Altogether, from Sept. 17 through Nov. 5, we served the needs of 17,500 people," Bowen says.

Bowen says her small agency would not have been able to fill the need without volunteers. She reports 1,215 volunteers donated 4,784 hours to relief efforts during the six weeks after the hurricane.

Going forward, Brunswick Family Assistance will begin raising money and partnering with organizations such as the Wilmington Area Rebuilding Ministry Inc. and Brunswick Housing Opportunities Inc. to repair homes throughout the county.

"We are shifting our focus to longterm efforts, and we still have a long way to go," she says.

Weeks after the hurricane, life is getting back to normal — a "new normal," according to Bowen. But community support has been strong. "I have never seen people come together like they did after Florence," she says. ■



Brunswick Electric Membership Corp. crews work to restore power after Hurricane Florence. Crews came from as far as Minnesota to help in the recovery effort.

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NORTH CAROLINA PORTS





UNC Wilmington canceled classes for four weeks after Hurricane Florence hit, but some students stayed busy volunteering their time to assist local homeowners with the recovery efforts.

suffered significant hurricane damage.

Sartarelli and his administrative team executed a massive student and employee evacuation and re-entry before and after the hurricane while learning plenty of valuable lessons, not the least of which was "do a lot of listening, respond quickly, ask questions and talk to each other," he says.

When Hurricane Florence first threatened North Carolina from hundreds of miles at sea, "Safety first" was Sartarelli's guiding principle. The university's extensive disaster plan calls for regular drills and monthly planning meetings.

"Just six months before the storm, we conducted a drill we called Operation Zephyr, which was helpful when we had the real disaster," says Janine lamunno, the university's chief communications officer.

This year, UNCW has a record enrollment and retention, with 17,000

students enrolled and 2,300 employees, according to lamunno. But this successful enrollment called for a massive transfer of people away from campus to safer locations in a narrow time frame.

On Sept. 10, four days before Florence made landfall, the university announced a voluntary evacuation. A mandatory evacuation notice was issued on Sept. 11 and by the 12th, the campus was empty. Most students went home. Other universities in the UNC System housed some displaced students. About 20 were bused to UNC Asheville.

As soon as the storm passed, the focus shifted to returning the university to life, a challenging prospect in the face of an estimated \$140 million in damage to classrooms, dormitories and apartments. Wilmington and other towns became islands when water from the overflowing Cape Fear River

made Interstate 40 and other roadways impassable.

Among the most heavily impacted were 390 freshmen. For many, this was their first time away from home. They were assigned housing in off-campus residences, hotels and other dorms on campus. Many of them had suffered personal loss, including their homes.

Classes resumed on Oct. 8, four weeks after the hurricane. A normal semester is 15 weeks, and UNCW faced squeezing 15 weeks of classwork into 11 weeks, according to Sartarelli.

"We canceled fall break, squeezed final exams into a tighter time frame and added five to 15 minutes to classes to try to make up for lost time," Sartarelli says.

As the storm unfolded, the university repurposed a financial assistance fund to help students and employees suffering from hardship and loss.

"We knew we had to create a process of getting money in the hands of those in need as quickly as possible, so we set up a portal for people to use to donate money and for those who needed to apply for assistance," says Eddie Stuart, vice chancellor for university advancement.

As of late October, 847 donors had given about \$100,000 for students, and 135 donors had contributed \$30,000 to the employees' fund, according to Stuart. They have awarded more than 360 grants to students and 53 grants to employees.

UNCW and Clemson University played an exhibition basketball game with proceeds directed to students and the Good Shepherd Center. The fund will remain open for as long as students need help, Stuart says.

"The UNCW Hurricane Relief Fund won't solve all the problems, but it will provide some relief and give people a leg up in the short term to ease some of the burden," he says.



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BIG HELP FROM BIG ROCK IN CARTERET COUNTY

s Hurricane Florence approached North Carolina's coast, the management team at Big Rock Sports knew it was time to activate the corporate emergency plan and begin a controlled shutdown of its Morehead City administrative office and warehouse. The outdoor-goods distributor wanted to ensure employees had a safe place to go.

"If our local EMS declares a state of emergency, we activate our site hotline and send out texts and emails to all site employees with updates," says Shannon Adams, information technology director. "Also, department supervisors ensure each of their direct reports are accounted for after inclement weather."

Big Rock Sports, which has its roots in Carteret County, was formerly known as Henry's Tackle. The company has six distribution centers, including 500,000 square feet of warehouse space, throughout North America, according to Adams. The Morehead City facility has about 80 employees.

Adams evacuated to the North Carolina mountains and opened his home and Down East cottage for employees who needed a place to stay. Key personnel moved inland and worked out of the company's Graham headquarters while the Morehead City facility was shut down for five days from Sept. 12-17, Adams says.

Damage from Hurricane Florence was widespread, according to Don Kirkman, Carteret County economic development director.

"Every commercial business was impacted, and every part of our county as far south as Cape Carteret and north to the small Down East communities and as far inland to Newport, which is at the county's highest elevation," he says. "The hurricane spared no one."

Initial economic impact assessments

added up to \$1.8 billion in property damage, but a final reconciliation is waiting on an assessment of lost revenue, crops and businesses.

"This was the worst damage our county has suffered in recorded history," Kirkman says. Popular local festivals, including the Seafood Festival and Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament, were postponed and scaled down. Many workers were displaced, disrupting the county's labor force.

Some businesses were able to reopen quickly after the storm. Others won't be up and running for months. Some small businesses may close for good, Kirkman says.

"Shannon and Big Rock were amazing partners during and after the storm, providing assistance on fuel, warehousing of donated supplies and arranging contributions of supplies from customers," Kirkman says. "They also did an amazing job supporting their employees who were impacted [or displaced] by the storm."

Big Rock was fully operational by Sept. 20 and had some unoccupied warehouse space, so the company made that space available as a dropoff point for relief supplies where churches and other community service providers could pick them up for distribution.

"We had tractor-trailer loads come in from other parts of the state," he says. "We served three or four churches."

Kirkman says Big Rock's contributions were exceptional. "I am so proud of our site leaders who made sure our employees and our buildings were OK," Adams says. "I am also proud of our customers and community and proud of the work we did to provide support."



Big Rock Sports, Green Top Sporting Goods and United Methodist Church in Morehead City distribute donated supplies. Big Rock worked with multiple churches, providing a drop-off point for relief supplies.

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Sartarelli appreciates the way faculty and staff collaborated to make it through the storm and into recovery mode.

"I saw the great potential in people to collaborate and work together, and it was a beautiful sight," he says.

Life-changing experience for fraternity brothers

Nick Pianovich and Jordan Cooke, both juniors at UNCW, returned to their homes in Mooresville to wait out the storm after the university evacuated. The two returned about a week before classes started and embarked on volunteer experiences they say changed their lives.

Both men are active in campus fraternities, Cooke with Lambda Chi Alpha and Pianovich with Alpha Sigma Phi. Three weeks after Hurricane Florence, a member of Compassion Church, a local congregation, reached out to Cooke asking for volunteers to help hurricane victims in New Hanover and Pender counties. Cooke called Pianovich to help.

They rounded up another fraternity brother, and the three showed up in an area neighborhood on Sept. 27. The next day, 15 fraternity volunteers arrived to work alongside homeowners and relief teams from Cary, Charlotte and Virginia and spent nearly two weeks cleaning houses. Most of the homeowners were elderly residents, veterans and families, according to Cooke.

"We did a variety of things, furniture removal, taking out floors, walls, cabinetry and appliances," he says. "Our work lasted 11 days until school was back in session."

The fraternity volunteers cleaned out 23 flooded homes. Most of the

owners did not have flood insurance, Pianovich says.

"We grieved with them as we searched for salvageable belongings," he says.

They also worked with a tree removal company and helped distribute meals and care bags at a disaster-relief center. A T-shirt sale raised more than \$2,000. Altogether, the fraternity brothers have logged more than 1,700 volunteer hours with no plans to stop, according to Cooke.

"This means a lot to us, and we plan to continue working with Compassion Church as long as there is need, at least through the remainder of the school year," he says.

For both students, hurricane relief work was a life-changing experience.

"Our efforts were worth every minute we spent helping," Pianovich





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Ed Wolverton, CEO of Wilmington Downtown Inc., shown here speaking with Gov. Roy Cooper and the press, created a task force after the hurricane. An "Over Flo" celebration featured special events each weekend in October.

ssays. "It was a great learning experience. We came into this unaware, and thanks to Compassion Church, the life skills we learned and the images we saw will impact us for the rest of our lives."

Cape Fear Regional Jetport gives back

Because flooded roads and highways cut off large portions of the coast, stranding many people and keeping volunteers from getting in, the Cape Fear Regional Jetport was a popular place for delivering supplies by air. Operation Airdrop, an organization formed by private pilots in Texas in 2017 to help deliver supplies to stranded victims of Hurricane Harvey, was in full force.

After establishing a home base at Raleigh-Durham International Airport, pilots flew private planes full of food,



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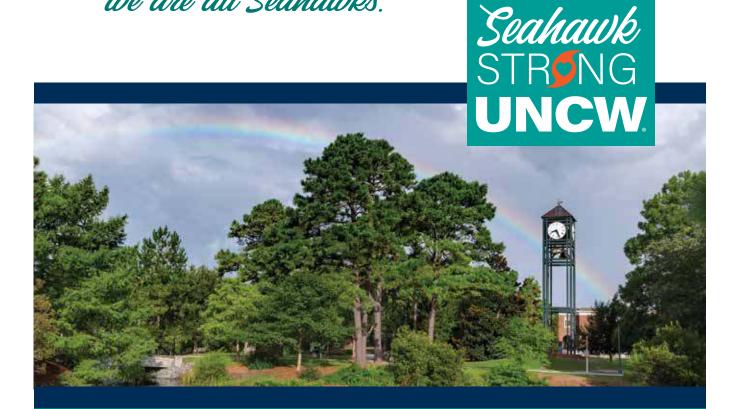


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e are very proud to call this state home.
Our neighbors from near and far have reached out to help our Seahawks find their wings again after Hurricane Florence. UNCW is also proud to recognize our students and employees for pitching in and helping our community, and communities throughout the state, even in the midst of their own struggles. Thank you, North Carolinians, for your commitment, compassion and generosity.

At times like these, we are all Seahawks.



uncw.edu/hurricanerelief



University of North Carolina Wilmington

water, cleaning supplies and even medications to small airports along North Carolina's storm-ravaged coastline — places unreachable by land in the immediate aftermath of Florence.

For an entire week, a long line of cars loaded with donated items made their way to the general aviation terminal at RDU, where volunteers sorted and weighed each item and loaded them onto planes bound for areas in need. From thousands of bottles of water to necessary medical devices, no supplies were too mundane or hard to acquire.

"During Operation Airdrop, we had 150 planes in and out," says Howie Franklin, the jetport's director. "Planes arrived with supplies from as far away as Chicago, Miami and New York City."

More than 50 volunteers were assembled at the jetport at any

given time, offloading the planes and taking their cargo to the front of the airport where it was distributed to other volunteers making deliveries.

"We even had the Cajun Navy step up to deliver supplies to people who couldn't get out of their houses due to flooding," Franklin says.

The public-use airport, built in 1961, sits 24 feet above sea level and suffered no damage from wind or flooding, making it an ideal site for airborne deliveries.

In addition to offering its 5,505foot runway to the operation, the jetport donated \$12,000 worth of fuel to the volunteer pilots who usually cover the costs themselves for missions such as this one.

New Hanover Regional establishes innovative medical shelter

In the aftermath of Hurricane Flor-

ence, hospital care was at a premium in New Bern and Wilmington, two of the hardest hit cities in eastern North Carolina.

When patients ready to be discharged from New Hanover Regional Medical Center in Wilmington could not return home because of storm damage, the hospital opened a medical shelter at Codington Elementary School to serve their ongoing medical needs.

"We had patients who were eligible to be discharged, but they had no home to go to, and those that needed dialysis and oxygen had no electricity to power their equipment," says trauma services director Terri DeWees.

On Sept. 17, after the storm lifted, hospital leaders decided to set up the medical shelter, the first of its kind in that community. They opened



it the next day at 8 a.m. Patients started arriving at 3 p.m. It ran 24 hours a day until 3 p.m. Sept. 23.

"It operated just like a small hospital, with identical safety measures and protocols," says Amy Messier, a family practitioner with New Hanover Medical Group. The shelter administered any and all needs — medical, pharmacy and emotional. Case workers were on hand to help with patient care, navigate Medicare and Medicaid and provide needs assessments to build a care plan.

Community residents also pitched in, donating meals, clothes, personal hygiene supplies and even a portable shower unit, according to Messier.

Community physician practices also had patients with chronic illnesses in a shelter at Hoggard High School and moved them to the Codington shelter, where a team of medical professionals, administrators and case workers cared for 52 patients for a week, working in 12-hour shifts. The sheriff's department and National Guard provided 24-hour security coverage.

"Patients had everything they needed. It was amazing," Messier says. "Nurse educators moved back into patient care; outpatient nurses went back to inpatient care protocols; and other professionals who had not delivered patient care in a long time stepped in to help."

The unique partnership among hospital employees, county and state officials, and school administrators created a strong bond and provided incredible service to patients, DeWees says.

"Many tears were shed throughout the process, and it was a life-changing and humbling experience," she says. "We made a difference in a situation that was devastating for so many people."

CarolinaEast Health System "pitched in to do everything"

Ray Leggett, CarolinaEast Health System's president and CEO, has lived in eastern North Carolina for many years and has seen his share of hurricanes. But he knew he was about to witness a different kind of storm as Hurricane Florence made its presence known.

"I knew it was different on Sept.

13 when I looked out the window and saw that things were turning bad before the storm had even arrived," he says. Water started flooding the downtown streets before Florence made landfall.

With the blessing of a week's lead time, the New Bern hospital's emer-



gency preparation team started laying the groundwork for a plan. Knowing the staff could not evacuate, they formed a plan to establish the hospital as a safety net for patients. In addition to health care providers, janitorial, food service and other staff stayed on the job for days, sleeping in their offices or on cots. Leggett slept in his office for three days.

Inpatient census was already high and kept growing as the hospital became a destination for more than 100 patients evacuated from nursing homes and hospice-care centers. The hospital's main building is 600,000 square feet, according to Leslie Allen, vice president for facilities and safety. During the hurricane and its aftermath, 310 patients and

families were sheltering there, including 100 patients on dialysis. The police department flooded, and 30 police officers operated out of the hospital. About 30 National Guard troops were stationed there, too.

More than 1,000 staff members — 40% of the entire staff — suffered significant loss, and the hospital set up a hurricane assistance fund to help.

"Nurses, doctors, X-ray techs and everyone pitched in to do everything. We even had doctors pushing food carts and serving meals to patients," Leggett says. "This was an incredible education for our staff."

Wilmington is open for business

"The downtown was hit hard, but merchants and business owners teamed up to help each other," says Natalie English, president and CEO of the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce.

After the hurricane, The Foxes Boxes, a local restaurant committed to public service and community action, set up a distribution center and collected food, water and cleaning supplies for Wilmington residents and businesses in need.

Even Independence Mall stepped up to help, offering space in the former Sears department store as a central location for services. The Salvation Army distributed relief supplies, the Community Recovery Resource Center opened an office where residents could receive Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, apply for FEMA assistance and seek assistance from a variety of nonprofit and community organizations.

Ed Wolverton, president and CEO of Wilmington Downtown Inc., a local economic-development group, did not evacuate. He kept



working as the storm raged and hit the ground running when it blew through. In a city that depends on tourism, Hurricane Florence dealt a heavy blow, forcing large conferences and popular events to be canceled. This time of year, downtown hotels normally packed with visitors who spend money in shops, bars and restaurants were instead filled with service providers, electricians and builders, Wolverton says.

"The economic impact has been tough," he says. "One of our biggest challenges has been bringing people back to our downtown."

It did not take long for the town to get ready to receive visitors. Five days after the hurricane left, all of downtown had electricity. But business was sparse.

"There was a big perception that our downtown was closed because of the hurricane," Wolverton says. "So we invited Gov. Roy Cooper to tour downtown, hoping the media coverage would show people that our businesses were open."

Wolverton created a task force to strategize ways to entice people to return downtown. About 60 merchants participated. They created a monthlong post-Florence celebration, calling it "Over Flo." A local artist created a special logo for it. The celebration launched in October and featured special events every weekend.

"We crafted our message to tie together several of our economic sectors: Music Over Flo, Arts Over Flo, Shops Over Flo and Food and Beverage Over Flo," Wolverton says.

To raise money for flood victims, the Music Over Flo weekend featured a benefit concert on Oct. 13. Downtown merchants came up with a variety of coupons, discounts, and special pricing to further lure customers, and they donated proceeds to hurricane victims through charities

such as the Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina, Nourish N.C., the local Salvation Army unit, the Good Shepherd Center, Random Acts and the Harrelson Center.

English says the camaraderie on display in downtown Wilmington was just one example of the way businesses, agencies and individuals pulled together to lift each other up throughout eastern North Carolina.

"Our downtown businesses and organizations pitched in to help each other by getting humidifiers running, picking up debris and assisting with cleanup," she says. "Because that's what neighbors do."

— Teri Saylor is a freelance writer from Raleigh.



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