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My View: Hurricane Season: evacuate or stay?

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by: Victor Kline | Guest columnist

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As one of the instructors with our Lakewood Ranch Community Emergency Response Team, I spend most of my time helping our neighborhood volunteers stay prepared to respond should a major storm or other disaster threaten our area. So, when neighbors ask me if they should evacuate when a hurricane is heading our way or ride out the storm at home, they want a simple “yes” or “no” answer. Unfortunately, my answer is always ... “it depends.”

First, I ask them to consider their risk tolerance. In August 2004, Hurricane Charley was predicted to hit the Tampa area as a Category 3 storm. Residents of Port Charlotte, two hours to the south, were told to expect tropical storm winds and rain, so most residents of the area had backyard barbecues, did little pre-storm preparation and planned to ride out the storm at home. A major hurricane hadn’t hit this part of Florida in 40 some-odd years — most residents were not concerned.

On Aug. 13, 2004, Hurricane Charley slammed into Port Charlotte packing sustained winds of 145 mph and gusts of 175 mph.

More than 3,000 conventional homes and 9,000 mobile homes were destroyed in Charlotte County, alone. Seven schools were lost, and thousands were left homeless. Twenty-nine people lost their lives.

Lakewood Ranch is 45 miles from Port Charlotte: That could have been us!

So, let me ask you: Do you feel lucky?

We then talk about preparation. Is their home hurricane resistant? Do they have disaster supplies to last, at least, a week? Suppose the power is out. How will they cook? How will they keep their food from spoiling? Will their toilets back up because the sewage pumping stations have lost power? Where will they get water to drink? Will all their family members be able to tolerate the 95-degree heat and humidity, not to mention the insects?

At that point, my neighbors usually say that if the storm looks like it is going to be that bad, they will either go to a shelter or evacuate to some undefined location. They have a plan. They have no reservations at hotels along their escape route. They have no “go-bag” with important documents, clothing, personal-care items, medications and the like. They assume the shelter at the elementary school up the street will be ready to welcome them with hot meals and entertainment.

Then, there is the issue of time.

The National Weather Service issues a hurricane watch 48 hours in advance of the storm’s expected arrival, and a hurricane warning (sustained winds of at least 74 mph) 36 hours ahead. By that time, the few escape routes out of the area are clogged, and history tells us that those leaving at that 36-hour point will probably spend the next day in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

In April, Colorado State University meteorologists predicted 10 named storms this year generating four hurricanes, two of which would be major ones (Category 3 or higher).

I think about the residents of Port Charlotte and conclude that whether my neighbors decide to stay, or evacuate, they really need to have a plan and be prepared.

For disaster-planning information, please visit the Lakewood Ranch Community Emergency Response Team web site at lwrcert.org.

Victor Kline is the vice president of Lakewood Ranch Community Emergency Response Team.

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