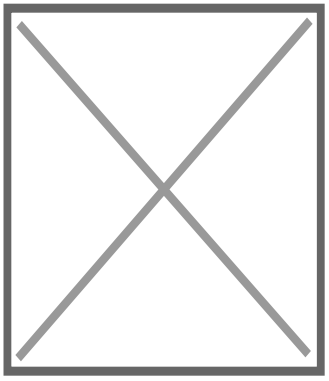
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UTILITY SERVICE & 2017 HURRICANES: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

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The 2016 Florida hurricane season was a painful reminder to many Floridians that the best laid plans of utilities, local governments, and individuals do not always work out as expected. People lose telecommunications and electric services even with tropical storm winds, and power losses can also impact water and sewer services.

The devastating hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 transformed the ways Florida's utilities, especially the electric utilities, plan and prepare for hurricanes. As a consequence of these storms, the Florida Public Service Commission ("PSC") implemented new policies to require utilities to inspect and repair or replace defective poles carrying power or telecommunications lines. In addition, utilities were directed to improve service reliability by hardening infrastructure serving critical facilities such as hospitals, law enforcement, and other essential services.

Despite extensive preparations, the impact of the first hurricane to hit Florida in ten years proved unexpected. When Hurricane Hermine made landfall south of Tallahassee on September 2nd as a Category 1 hurricane, 68 percent of the Tallahassee area lost electric power, with other surrounding counties suffering higher power losses. While water service was not seriously threatened by the power lost, over half of Tallahassee's sewer lift stations lost power, which became an early focus of power restoration. While most cellular towers remained intact, the network became overwhelmed with people attempting to make telephone calls or to access websites. The City of Tallahassee electric service outage website could not keep up with the demand for information.

Hurricane Matthew, which a month later skirted the Florida coast before making landfall in South Carolina on October 7, also had widespread utility service losses, especially power and telecommunications. Nearly 250,000 customers in the Jacksonville area lost power.

So what is the big take away from the 2016 hurricanes for utility customers? Be prepared by assuming the worse. While all Florida utilities do their very best to prepare their infrastructure from the storms, and to make storm recovery occur as swiftly as is safely possible, conditions do not always cooperate.

In a community like Tallahassee, that prides itself on its canopy roads and large trees, the best tree trimming program in the world cannot insulate the entire utility infrastructure from tree damage that closes roads and knocks down lines. Even neighborhoods with underground utilities are dependent upon above ground transmission lines to feed those neighborhoods. Hermine caused significant damage to Tallahassee's transmission network.

Since every storm is unique, just like the utilities, you need to plan and prepare.

The State of Florida Emergency Management Team and the National Hurricane Center websites all provide check lists and suggestions for food, water, batteries, and other important storm preparations. When you are told to prepare to be on your own for three days, assume a minimum of three days. After Hermine, three days later 19 percent of Tallahassee was still without electricity. So five days of supplies may be a better plan.

As you prepare for the 2017 hurricane season, here are a few utility matters you need to remember.

First, safe utility management practices mean that when storm winds reach certain thresholds, the electric utilities will turn off the power. This is done to protect life and property and to facilitate recovery. If power is turned off, it will not be turned back on until utility managers believe conditions are safe to reenergize lines. Thus, if a major storm is heading to your area, you should assume a loss of power for at least 12-24 hours.

While you may lose power, usually natural gas service and water/sewer service remain available. However, you should still stockpile the recommended drinking water for at least three days, and five days is always better.

Remember, if you lose water service, you can't flush your toilet unless you fill your tank with more water you have saved. So flush only when necessary and always fill your bathtub to use for your toilet if you lose water service. If you need your bathtub to store drinking water, sanitize it first.

While gas and water lines are underground, sometimes the uprooting of trees can break lines, so be alert to boil water notices and gas service leaks. If you have water service but you have a boil notice, the water is okay to flush your toilet.

The utility companies want to restore service as quickly as is safely possible. There is a method to their restoration efforts – generally they seek to restore power to the greatest number of people as can be safely done. This usually means large transmission lines first and then distribution lines that serve large areas. After Hermine, this procedure meant that initially, few people in Tallahassee had power restored. If there is widespread tree damage blocking roads, restoration may be further delayed.

If the power line drop from the pole to your residence is down, that may be one of the last things restored. DO NOT EVER TRY TO RESTORE YOUR OWN POWER.

Landline telephone service, whether from a traditional telephone company like AT&T or a cable company like Comcast, is largely delivered over wires that are attached to the same poles as electric lines. If there is widespread damage to power lines, you may also be without landline telephone and cable service. Telephone restoration often has to wait for electric restoration, but damage to a telephone or cable system network is not going to be the same as to the electric network. Be patient.

Wireless telephone service also relies upon wire lines to connect cellular towers and electricity to power the radios that make the wireless services work. This means that your wireless service can be just as vulnerable to storm damage as other utility services.

While your wireless phone service may work during and even immediately after a storm, sometimes you will lose service later, especially if there is widespread devastation. The wireless companies have backup electric power to most cell tower locations, but backup power sources have limitations. So wireless sites may go down over time as power outages continue.

If you continue to have wireless service during and after a storm, demand on those resources often increases significantly. Do not voice call your friends and talk during the storm or afterward to catch up. Instead, text family and friends that you are safe and then get offline.

Don’t use valuable wireless data sources to surf the net for storm information and stay off of Facebook and other social media sites to conserve your phone’s power for emergencies. If you find that it takes more than a few seconds to access a website, that means local data networks are overwhelmed so stop and don’t make it worse. Instead, to gain emergency information, use a battery operated radio, which will last longer.

The wireless companies have the ability to limit all voice calling to only 911 services or certain other emergency numbers. This limitation can be imposed even if you are hundreds of miles away from the storm’s path. This limitation is done in order to preserve network resources and to permit calls to emergency responders.

Today’s utility networks are very “smart” in that the utilities know about service outages as they occur. If you are experiencing a major storm, and you lose power, telephone, water, cable, or other services, the utility most likely already knows. If your neighbors are without service, there is no need to call the utility. Listen to your local emergency radio station to learn what the situation is. If it is a minor storm and it is only the power line to your house that is knocked down, then certainly call the utility to report that event.

Finally, if at any time during a storm, large or small, you or someone in your home is experiencing a health or life emergency, fire, natural gas leak, or other serious situation, call 911. But if you are not experiencing an emergency situation, stay off the phone and certainly do not call 911.

We cannot stop hurricanes, tropical storms, or tornados. But we can reasonably prepare for them and the potential loss of utility services. Like the utilities that plan and prepare for storms and their aftermaths, you need to as well. And be ready for the worse. The health and safety of your family depends upon you being prepared and well stockpiled for the worse.

If you have questions regarding the obligations of utility companies in the event of a catastrophe, please contact attorney Floyd Self on the firm’s Government and Regulatory Team.

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