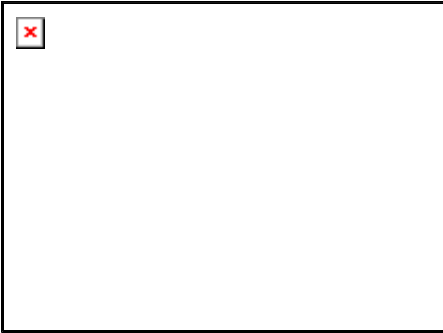


On your own during a hurricane

By **CYNTHIA McCORMICK**
STAFF WRITER

If and when a big hurricane hits Cape Cod, the two steel bridges spanning the canal won't prove much of an escape route.



■ Dan Scollan, right, of the American Red Cross, demonstrates how to prepare "heater" meals to volunteers at Oak Ridge School in East Sandwich. (Staff photo by Paul Blackmore)

Imagine trying to funnel up to 500,000 people - if a hurricane hits in the high summer season - off the Cape 12 hours before a storm makes landfall. The bridges close to campers, vans and trucks when gusts hit 80 mph and to all traffic when sustained winds reach the same speed.

It can't be done, say local emergency management officials.

Yes, there are plans in place to streamline the flow of traffic by blocking local feeder road access to routes 28 and 6 near the bridges. But emergency managers are

planning on most Cape Codders staying put.

"It's actually more of a traffic management plan than an evacuation plan," said Sean O'Brien, coordinator of the Barnstable County Regional Emergency Planning Committee.

One calculation shows it would take at least 96 hours to evacuate the entire Cape - and that's without factoring in accidents and people running out of gas, O'Brien said.

Anyone who has driven on or off Cape during a holiday weekend can picture the traffic nightmare that would ensue. "On Memorial Day weekend, the traffic was backed up to Exit 7 in Yarmouth," O'Brien pointed out.

Shelters available

Cape residents and visitors who don't "self-evacuate" early in the game - preferably 24 hours ahead of a predicted landfall - most likely will stay right here.

If their dwelling is in a low-lying area, fire and police officials may tell them to evacuate to higher ground.

People should go to one of the Cape's 16 American Red Cross shelters only if they have no other options, county officials said. These are the so-called "primary" shelters that are safe enough to be opened during the height of the hurricane.

The reasoning is simple: These shelters, mostly schools, only have enough capacity to

temporarily house 15,000 people - just a fraction of the Cape's year-round population of 222,000.

"If the whole Cape has to shelter, the Red Cross is going to be overwhelmed," said Mashpee Fire Chief George Baker, chairman of the Barnstable County Regional Emergency Planning Committee.

The good news, emergency managers say, is that most of the Cape should remain high and dry even in a fierce hurricane.

"Essentially water is the big killer," said Peter Judge, spokesman for the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency.

"There's no way a 10-foot storm surge is going to impact where I'm standing now," Judge said. "The vast majority of people are well above that."

New England's last monster hurricane, the storm of 1938, carried 10- to 12-foot storm surges and killed 600 people from Long Island to Buzzards Bay.

Office workers drowned in downtown Providence and entire households were swept out to sea.

If a storm of that magnitude took a direct hit on the Cape, 20 percent of the land might be flooded, according to some accounts.

Judge said it would be mostly beaches and marshland, but the Cape Cod Commission says that 95,924 of the Cape's year-round residents live in a federally designated hurricane flood zone, known as a SLOSH zone.

Many homeowners already know through their insurance companies that they live in a possible flood zone. The military also has a map of hurricane inundation areas that can be located online.

"These are things that are important to know," O'Brien said. "Are you in a flood zone? Don't stay. Know where your town shelter is located or go to a friend's on higher ground."

Still, the Cape is no New Orleans. That bowl-shaped city drowned when breached levees poured water into below-sea level streets and neighborhoods.

The most vulnerable Cape homes will be those located near the shore. Dams or ponds could flood if the hurricane drops a lot of rain on the area.

Folks who live in those areas may want to make plans in advance to stay with friends or in a hotel on higher ground, Judge said.

"Plenty of warning"

One of the many horrors of Katrina was the way some nursing home residents drowned in their beds. Judge says that wouldn't happen here.

Every town has an emergency manager who is in charge of evacuating nursing homes, group

homes and other locations housing frail and vulnerable people, Judge said.

Plans to link local, state and federal emergency officials already have been set in place, Judge said. He said the Department of Homeland Security recently rated Massachusetts' emergency planning among the top 10 states.

"Unfortunately, people see (New Orleans) and they think, 'Oh my God, the same thing is going to happen here.'"

Emergency managers also advise people to create kits with enough food and water for themselves and their pets to last at least three days.

"You get plenty of warning," Judge said. "We watch these things bounce around the Caribbean for a week or so."

But Baker remembers how quickly the last Cape hurricane, Bob, turned around in August 1991.

"When we went to bed Sunday night, forecasts showed it was going into North Carolina," he said. "By 8 a.m. Monday it bounced off and headed right for us."

Bob didn't produce a huge storm surge and was a relatively dry storm.

"That was a Category 1, and I was still without power for six days," O'Brien said. "It could get worse than that. It wasn't life or death at the time. A Category 3 coming up? People had better beware."

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