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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2017 | YOUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1874 | \$1.00

Lake City Reporter

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Blanche reboot will take a while

City Hall is staying put for now under new, cheaper plan.

By TAYLOR GAINES
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New plans to renovate the Blanche Hotel may be a few weeks away, according to the developer.

The city council voted Tuesday to table the issue and set a workshop at a later date to discuss options for the project, but one has not been set at this time.



Johnson
Valdosta based Integrity Development Partners

President Rhett Holmes said with people traveling and Hurricane Irma barreling toward the state, it may take a bit longer to prepare a revised plan for the hotel's renovation.

"I'm not sure we're going to get as much accomplished over the next two weeks as I would like to," Holmes said.

Holmes and City Manager Wendell Johnson both said the plan needed to change after Tuesday's Blanche workshop and city council meeting.

"There's options that could result in a plan that would work, but at this point, I just don't know what those are," Johnson said. "That's certainly going to be up to the discretion of the developers and the city council."

Both men also said moving City Hall across the street into the new Blanche is probably off the table.

"I can almost guarantee that's probably not gonna be an option moving forward," Johnson said. "That's very unlikely that that would happen at this juncture."

Councilwoman Melinda Moses said in a letter to the editor in today's edition that the city "will not purchase any part of the Blanche" as part of the new plan.

BLANCHE continued on 2A



Branford resident Jason Hunter searches for survivors in Houston last week. COURTESY PHOTOS

Branford man a Houston hero

But after boat sank in Texas, he won't be making rescues here.

By CARL MCKINNEY
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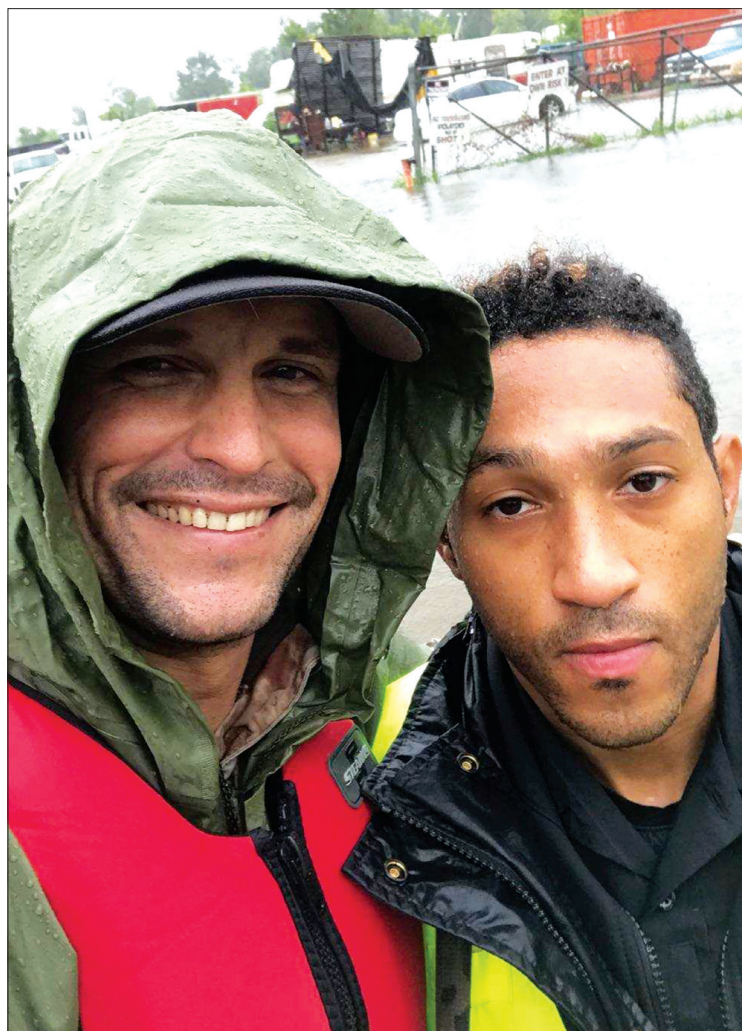
Exhausted after the 15-hour drive back from Houston, Jason Wayne Hunter returned home to Branford just in time to help with the Hurricane Irma rescue effort.

Unfortunately, his boat is not up to the task after sustaining heavy damage carrying Hurricane Harvey survivors to safety.

Compelled by footage of the destruction left in the storm's wake, Hunter pulled up to a flooded police station parking lot in northeast Houston around 5 p.m. Aug. 28.

He had spoken to Houston Police Department Sgt. Ray Gannon on the phone and arranged to help search for survivors.

HOUSTON continued on 2A



ABOVE: Hunter poses with Officer Lance Calloway of the Houston Police Department after rescuing several survivors in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. **LEFT:** The wreckage of Hunter's boat lies in the parking lot of a police station in northeast Houston. He borrowed a jet ski the next day to continue his rescue mission.

Mistrial threatened in natural gas lawsuit

Attorney went where he shouldn't have, judge says.

By CARL MCKINNEY
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The lawsuit between Lake City and a Tennessee-based energy company

could end in a mistrial at any moment over the next eight days, said the judge overseeing the case.

An attorney representing America's CNG, a natural gas firm suing the city for breach of contract, violated a motion prohibiting the use of arguments or evidence based on the financ-

es of third parties, Judge Paul Bryan said during the second day of the trial at the Columbia County Courthouse Wednesday morning.

"I think it's serious, I think it's egregious," Bryan said.



Bryan

TRIAL continued on 2A

ECON BOARD

Monthly meetings are going private

Chief will meet with members individually, behind closed doors.

By CARL MCKINNEY
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The Columbia County Economic Development Advisory Board is poised to end its regularly scheduled monthly meetings, choosing



Williams
instead to have private, one-on-one briefings with Economic Development Director Glenn Hunter.

When the board gathered for the first time in three months on Wednesday morning, EDAB Chairman Ron Williams said the regular monthly meetings have frequently been pointless.

"A lot of times, we meet just to meet," Williams said.

In light of the July and August EDAB meetings being canceled due to a lack of discussion items, Williams suggested meeting quarterly to vote on action items, with special meetings scheduled as needed.

Board member Marc Vann said the switch would mean Hunter has to make an additional effort to keep everyone updated on projects.

"We still need to be as informed as possible," Vann said. "We

EDAB continued on 2A

Local officials gear up for Irma

By KAYLA LOKEINSKY
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As Hurricane Irma makes its way towards Florida, local government officials are bracing themselves for a potential impact and making plans for residents.

Columbia County Emergency Management has been working with its partner agencies to look at different options for the county, according to Emergency Management Director Shayne Morgan.

"It's a guessing game at this point with us not knowing where the storm is turning," Morgan said. "We're trying to make smart, informed decisions based on the

IRMA continued on 3A



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Indians play tonight, too
Irma disrupts gridiron schedule, 1B.

MONSTER IRMA NEARS US



PHOTOS BY AL DIAZ/Tribune News Service

Traffic heads north along the Florida Turnpike near Homestead as tourists in the Florida Keys leave town on Wednesday.

Largest-ever Atlantic hurricane hammers Caribbean

By DANICO COTO
Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Heavy rain and 185-mph winds lashed the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico's northeast coast Wednesday as Hurricane Irma roared through Caribbean islands on its way to a possible hit on South Florida.

The strongest Atlantic Ocean hurricane ever measured destroyed homes and flooded streets across a chain of small islands in the northern Caribbean, passing directly over Barbuda and leaving the island of some 1,700 people incommunicado.

France sent emergency food and water rations to the French islands of Saint Martin and Saint Barthelemy, where Irma ripped off roofs and knocked out all electricity. Dutch marines who flew to three Dutch islands hammered by Irma reported extensive damage but no deaths or injuries.

While France received no immediate reports of casualties, the minister for French overseas territories, Annick Girardin, said: "We have a lot to fear for a certain number of our compatriots who unfortunately didn't want to listen to the protection measures and go to more secure sites ... We're preparing for the worst."

By early Wednesday evening the center of the storm was 20 miles east-southeast of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands and 90 miles east of San Juan, Puerto Rico and heading



Peter Gonzalez and Jorge Abreu with Hurricane Busters Enterprises install hurricane shutters at a home in Key Largo in preparation for Hurricane Irma.

west-northwest at 16 mph. The U.S. National Weather Service said Puerto Rico had not seen a hurricane of Irma's magnitude since Hurricane San Felipe in 1928, which killed a total of 2,748 people in Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico and Florida.

"We have to prepare for the worst," Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rossello said. "If we don't, it could be devastating."

Puerto Rico's public power company has cut back on staff and maintenance amid a deep economic crisis and the agency's director warned that some areas could be without power from four to six months because the infrastructure has already deteriorated so badly. Outages were reported in some neighborhoods well ahead of the storm, with more than 285,000 homes without power and nearly 4,500

people without water by mid-afternoon Wednesday. Nearly 1,000 people were in shelters along with more than 100 pets.

The federal government has stepped in, with President Donald Trump this week approving an emergency declaration for the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. That means that the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other agencies can remove debris and give other services that will largely be paid for by the U.S. government.

EPA officials said their biggest concerns were oil spills and power disruptions to water supply systems.

"No matter what precautions we take, the coastal flooding will impact oil tanks," said Catherine McCabe, a regional administrator.

Another concern is

the 20 Superfund sites in Puerto Rico and the three in the U.S. Virgin islands, given that most are near the coast, she said. She said EPA officials in New Jersey are on standby to fly down after the hurricane passes through.

State maintenance worker Juan Tosado said he was without power for three months after Hurricane Hugo killed dozens of people in Puerto Rico in 1989.

"I expect the same from this storm," he said. "It's going to be bad."

The U.S. National Hurricane Center said Irma's winds would fluctuate, but the storm would likely remain at Category 4 or 5 for the next day or two as it roared past Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba, the Turks & Caicos and parts of the Bahamas.

By early Sunday, Irma is expected to hit Florida.

House OKs \$7.9 billion Harvey bill

By ANDREW TAYLOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House on Wednesday overwhelmingly passed \$7.9 billion in Hurricane Harvey disaster relief as warring Republicans and Democrats united behind help for victims of that storm as an ever more powerful new hurricane bore down on Florida.

The 419-3 vote sent the aid package — likely the first of several — to the Senate in hopes of sending the bill to President Donald Trump before dwindling federal disaster reserves run out at the end of this week.

"Help is on the way," said Texas GOP Rep. John Culberson, whose Houston district was slammed by the storm. "The scale of the tragedy is unimaginable. But in the midst of all this, and all the suffering, it really reflects the American character, how people from all over the country stepped up to help Houstonians recover from this."

The first installment in Harvey aid is to handle the immediate emergency needs and replenish Federal Emergency Management Agency reserves in advance of Hurricane Irma, which is barreling through the Caribbean toward Florida.

"This is a chance to be your brother's keeper," said Houston Democratic Rep. Al Green. "This is chance for the unity that we express when we're before the cameras to manifest itself in the votes that we cast here in Congress."

Far more money will be needed once more complete estimates are in this fall, and Harvey could end up exceeding the \$110 billion government cost of Hurricane Katrina.

"My friends and neighbors' homes were completely flattened by Hurricane Harvey's winds. Businesses were destroyed," said Rep. Blake Farenthold, R-Texas. "FEMA will be out of money in just two or three days if we don't pass this."



Culberson

Politics quickly intruded as Democratic leaders insisted they would back the measure in the Senate only if it were linked to a short-term increase in the nation's borrowing limit, not the longer-term hike that Republicans and the Trump administration want.

And some Democrats from the New York delegation reminded Texas Republicans that they opposed a larger aid bill for those harmed by Superstorm Sandy in the Northeast five years ago.

"What you did to us during Superstorm Sandy should not stand, should not be done to any other people, anywhere in the country," said Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y. "We're one country, we're Americans. We need to help those who need help."

In the Senate, GOP leaders want to link a long-term increase in the debt limit — until 2019 — to the Harvey aid, but that plan faces opposition from conservatives and thus will need Democratic votes.

"I think it's a terrible idea," said House Freedom Caucus Chairman Mark Meadows, R-N.C., who conceded that conservatives were getting outmaneuvered.

"I think at this point there are bigger issues that we have to focus on," Meadows said.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York want to retain Democratic influence and trying to ensure the Republican-controlled Congress addresses health care and immigration as the hectic fall agenda kicks off.

"Given Republican difficulty in finding the votes for their plan, we believe this proposal offers a bipartisan path forward to ensure prompt delivery of Harvey aid as well as avoiding a default, while both sides work together to address government funding, DREAMERS, and health care," Pelosi and Schumer wrote.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said again Wednesday that increased Harvey costs show the importance of acting swiftly to increase the government's debt cap to make sure there's enough borrowed cash to pay out the surge in disaster aid.

IRMA

Continued From 1A

information we have."

Emergency Management will assess the path of Hurricane Irma as well as meet with more local agencies today before determining the next steps in storm preparation. Morgan says it's an advantage that the country has more time to prepare for this storm than the last major storm to hit the area, Hurricane Matthew.

"We didn't have this kind of time with Matthew that we do with Irma," Morgan said.

Emergency Management will determine this week whether to open shelters, and whether those will be host or risk shelters. Host shelters are opened when there is no risk to public safety in the area, while risk shelters are opened when the area is at risk, as these buildings can withstand impacts from storms.

"It's going to depend on where the storm hits," Morgan said.

Emergency Management will meet

LOCAL DISASTER GUIDE

■ Read Columbia County's 2017 Natural Hazards Guide online at www.LakeCityReporter.com.

with Schools Superintendent Lex Carswell this afternoon to determine whether or not schools in the district will be closed in the event that the Hurricane hits the area.

"We're going to keep schools open as of right now," Carswell said Wednesday afternoon.

Although Columbia County schools are open today, the open houses scheduled to take place at Westside, Eastside and Fort White Elementary schools tonight have been canceled.

Florida Gateway College is also monitoring Hurricane Irma, and the college will remain open as of today. According to FGC Public Information Specialist Stephen Culotti, the college will maintain normal operations, but is in communication with local and state emergency management.

"We are waiting for guidance from emergency management," Culotti

said in regards to plans for closing the campus.

If Hurricane Irma impacts its normal operating schedule, FGC will issue notifications and media alerts to students and staff.

The Florida Department of Corrections is also taking steps to ensure the safety of the public and inmates. In response to travel restrictions throughout the state, weekend visitation at all institutions for this Saturday and Sunday are canceled, including at all major institutions, work camps, community release centers and annex facilities.

State courts will also be closed Friday after Gov. Rick Scott ordered the closure of state offices. The governor also issued a call to state employees across Florida encouraging them to volunteer in support of the state's emergency efforts.

Scott on Wednesday said Irma could be bigger than Hurricane Andrew, a devastating Category 5 hurricane that 25 years ago raced across South Florida with 165 mph winds, leaving \$26.5 billion in damages.

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