

The town and residents are now entering an assessment period for Hurricane Helene's response. What did we do well, and what can we do better? I will focus this article on how each one of us should prepare for the next storm. Preparation for the approaching Helene was made by the town and by many residents. Still, honestly, no one at WNC anticipated the severe impact and loss of all utilities and communications services. Such disturbances could happen again, another Bizzard of 1993 or a Carrington solar impact as in 1959.

In this case, preparation translated into having the resources to respond to difficult situations after the storm had passed. A surprise to the entire region was how internet and cell phone communication was completely lost. The communication failure initially crippled the town and region and hampered emergency response efforts. I believe the town probably should have an emergency StarLink system ready for immediate deployment for the next severe storm.

I learned that our private vehicles can serve as a personal emergency center. That may not have been the case for many folks in flooded areas north of us where homes and property, including vehicles, were lost, but for Highlanders, the vehicles remained operational.

Like in Helene, for the next impending storm approaches, I will make sure my car is fully fueled. In Highlands we discovered our service stations had no generators to pump gas. To solve this problem, I hope the owners of the gas stations, as well as other critical providers such as hardware and food services, will have generators to at least provide marginal services.

A fully fueled vehicle can charge cell phones and other devices. Also, one can listen to local radio stations from a vehicle. I also recommend having an emergency radio with batteries or a hand-cranked generator.

As mayor, my only way of communicating for a while was sending out updates by way of WHLC. On Saturday, a week after the storm, a resident saw me in the downtown areas and began asking me about road closures and other questions about the storm. I was puzzled that the person didn't seem to know anything about the updates I had sent out through the radio. One update was broadcast by WHLC just before I talked with the person. I asked him if he had been listening to WHLC. His response was what was that? I told him it was our local radio station. He told me he did not know about it since he only listened to Sirius. So, being able to access our local station is critical. WHLC, with its old FM technology, was a reliable source of information.

My other recommendation is to have sufficient cash before a storm. We all found that the credit card systems were down just after Helene and remained down at many facilities for some time. Cash, too, is old-school stuff but still viable and the only option in an emergency.

Another suggestion would be to draw water into several containers before a storm. Thank goodness Highlands was able to maintain water services during and after the storm, but having a supply of potable water is always advisable.

The Highlands Town Board of Commissioners will meet at the Highlands Community Center on Thursday at 6 pm. The first session will be a workshop reviewing building code policies. The 7 pm meeting will be the official business meeting. One response to the emergency will be a review of the town website and how it can be enhanced to provide updates during an emergency as well as during routine operations.

Both meetings can be remotely accessed using a link on the town website.