

Subject: Emergencies and After-hours call center
October 5, 2022

The town was spared the remnants of Tropical Storm Ian this past weekend. Earlier in the week town staff and I had worried that we might have very heavy rains and high winds in the 50 to 80 mph range. If that had occurred power lines would have most likely gone down.

As I have stated on numerous occasions, when we lose power, patience should be everyone's first level of response. Like with the past weekend our crews were on standby, and when the town did have a power outage on Sunday morning, they responded quickly to get it back on. We live in a mountainous forest with tremendous amounts of rain, snow and strong winds, so power outages are inevitable.

I have also emphasized that residents should not overburden the 911 emergency system with calls reporting outages as soon as they occur. Our electric department has one of the fastest response systems available. During inclement weather crews are on standby and in some instances actually staying in the buildings at the town yard.

Instead of calling 911, please call after hours (828) 526-4131 to report outages if power has been out for a long period of time. The 4131 number is the nonemergency dispatch number for Macon County. Dispatchers will then radio our crews and report the problem. During regular business hours please call town hall at (828) 526-2118 to report outages. Our staff also has radios in order to contact electrical crews.

This past year our staff researched and explored contracting with a second party provider to create an after-hours call center. Initial inquiries were very promising, but when it got to the level of implementation several problems were identified. The companies we contacted normally serve large systems and municipalities, and Highlands did not qualify for the scale these companies normally serve. We also discovered they insisted on package contracts where they would handle all utility billing, service requests and service issues.

Another big problem was the interface with our electric crews. We have to rely on radios in order to communicate over the extreme topography of Highlands. This challenge would be problematic if the call center was somewhere like Lincoln, Nebraska or Boise, Idaho. Since our town already offers a direct service for billing and requests, coupled with the communications challenges, the staff was hesitant to embrace such an off-site system.

This is not to say we are giving up on the idea of an after-hours call center. Nevertheless, the staff is having to rethink how this system would function.

Reference visits from our elected officials last week, I want to thank Representative Karl Gillespie and State Senator Kevin Corbin for being our guests at the Community Coffee this past Friday. They are both Macon Countians and are very knowledgeable and supportive of the Highlands community.

I also want to thank everyone who attended and participated in the question, answer and discussion session. While we may not agree on all issues, it is always good to see citizens coming together to discuss critical issues with their elected officials in a civil manner.