

Subject: Wind Damage Response
Aug 9, 2023

Monday began as a beautiful day. There were forecasts of rain and thunderstorms in the afternoon, but that is a routine forecast for Highlands this time of the year.

As I worked in my pottery studio in the afternoon, the cable news folks started talking about an impending storm front that ran from Georgia to New York. The television forecasters were predicting heavy winds and rain along this front as it moved to the Atlantic coast. These predictions got my attention. Josh Ward contacted me to say the town crews were on standby in case the town experienced high winds, rain, and lightning.

About 30 minutes later, I received a code red message on my cell phone warning of impending severe weather. For residents that did not get the code red warning, you can go to the county website and sign up. Click on the public safety button and then scroll down and click on emergency management. The code red information will appear on the page.

The county emergency management system has a comprehensive system that sends out these warnings. Code red subscribers receive all emergency messages affecting Highlands and Macon County.

At about 4 pm, the storm front hit Highlands with heavy rains, severe lightning, and intense wind shears. Some of the wind shears replicated moments as if the town was in a hurricane. There was spot damage to the electric grid. Our crews responded accordingly after the winds and lightning had subsided, as the town staff manned the phones to take calls of outages.

About half of the town lost power, primarily due to one big incident, the snapping by the wind of a major Duke Energy transmission pole on Franklin Road, on which the town shares usage. Crews from Duke, assisted by Highlands town crews, responded to the arduous task of replacing the pole. It takes hours to erect a new pole and then to reconnect the lines. Duke Power and our town crews worked until 3 am to complete the job and restore power. Our police and fire departments worked with the line crews to manage traffic.

When the power did come back on, town crews discovered a tree on Wyanoak had fallen and taken out power in that area. They quickly removed the tree and re-established power. Earlier in the evening, the town crews had removed a fallen tree that had taken out power in the Big Bear Pen area.

The good news is that the town's electrical system had no poles broken during the storm. If that had happened, outages throughout the town would have lasted much longer.

My hat is once again off to our electrical crew and first responders. In emergency situations like this storm, they all work together to restore power as soon as possible.

Now, some folks might say the town needs to put all of our utility lines underground in order to ensure no power outages. But Highlands is not in Florida, where the land is flat, and the soil is sandy. The plateau has steep grades and more rock than sand. Such a tremendous expense and disruptive process would not necessarily guarantee no power loss. The town depends on

a power supply from energy producers like Duke. If their transmission system goes down in a major storm, we go down too.

Power outages are, unfortunately, a part of mountain living too. I can tell you that outages have been greatly reduced compared to past years.