

NEWS

Gated communities so far cut out from debris removal in Escambia County

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Local government contractors can't pick up debris from gated communities like Innerarity Island, which was hard hit from Hurricane Sally last month — a complication that is slowing down the debris removal process in Escambia County.

Officials with the Innerarity Island Homeowners Association are hopeful that local contractors will eventually get the OK to help the approximately 30 gated communities in Escambia County, but they are also working on a plan for how to respond if that doesn't happen, said Willie LaFavor, committee chairperson for the association.

Gated communities are just one of the unknowns related to debris pickup in the county more than two weeks after Sally.

"I think there's a lot of despair. There's a lot of residents that stayed and did not expect it to be near as bad as it was, so I think there is a lot of shock from just the strength of the storm, and then the amount of cleanup is just almost overwhelming to a lot of folks," LaFavor said.

The county's three contractors so far have collected 600,000 cubic yards of debris out of an estimated 1 million cubic yards, said Pat Johnson, Waste Services director.

A total of three passes over 90 days is the goal for Escambia County, but officials won't publish an exact map or schedule of debris pickup. Johnson declined to say when he thought the first pass would be complete or provide a schedule.

"The last thing I want to do is put out a schedule and a map and not be able to live up to that commitment. I just want to manage expectations and I want to be fair and reasonable and I don't want to put something out there that I really can't commit to," he said. "I want to be able to have a little bit of flexibility because so many variables are involved with this situation."

Escambia County Commissioner Jeff Bergosh requested a schedule during an agenda review meeting Thursday. He said residents were frustrated because they didn't know when the debris collectors would be at their homes.

"I asked that question about if we could give them the schedule of staging and I got pretty much shut down on that. You don't want to tell them because then you have to meet the timetable. And I said 'Well, then meet the timetable.' People were frustrated," Bergosh said.

"But I'm pleased (with debris pickup overall) thus far. I think we're doing pretty well."

The city of Pensacola does publish maps on Facebook of general areas where crews will be working. So far, the crews in the city have collected 122,644 cubic yards of debris of an estimated 350,000 cubic yards.

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The first of three passes will take at least a couple more weeks, said Kaycee Lagarde, city spokeswoman.

"There are still a lot of areas of the city that we need to get to, but we are working through that. It's just with the sheer volume of debris that needs to be collected, it's just going to take us some time," Lagarde said.

Business and commercial material is not eligible to be removed curbside by Escambia County, and owners should contact their waste collection service provider or a debris removal contractor.

Escambia County does have a number of debris collection sites where residents can drop their debris off instead of waiting for pick up crews. Johnson said activity hasn't been overly busy at the sites but they've been an option, especially for people with small rights of way.

He said staff are still determining whether they'll open another site with the hopes of increasing convenience for residents.

The current sites are:

- 745 County Road 99, McDavid
- Escambia County Equestrian Center, 7750 Mobile Highway

- John R. Jones Junior Athletic Complex
- Lexington Terrace, South Old Corry Road
- Baars Field, 13020 Sorrento Road
- Park East, 1233 Fort Pickens Road

Some neighbors may feel skipped if crews had picked up debris around their house but Johnson said there's been some "overhead conflicts." That means power lines or live trees are prohibiting the bigger machines from picking up debris at some properties and crews will have to come back in smaller trucks later.

Otherwise, the county is asking residents to be patient and put more debris out when they can.

"If you just be patient with me and just hang in there for a few more days, chances are that stuff's going to be gone and you'll have opportunity to put more out," Johnson said.

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