

MINUTES
CITY OF INDIAN ROCKS BEACH
HURRICANE TASK FORCE

Civic Auditorium
1507 Bay Palm Blvd., Indian Rocks Beach, FL 33785

Wednesday, May 27, 2026
Meeting called to order at 6:00 PM

1. Welcome, Pledge of Allegiance, Introductions

Presented by: Commissioner Hilary King (Meeting Chair)

Commissioner King welcomed all attendees and introduced guest speaker Chief Ken Grimes from the Pinellas Suncoast Fire & Rescue District. The meeting agenda was reviewed, including a recap of the previous meeting held on May 13, 2026.

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

(To provide continuity for research, items are listed in agenda order although not necessarily discussed in that order.)

2. Fire Chief Ken Grimes, Pinellas Suncoast Fire & Rescue District

Presented by: Ken Grimes, Fire Chief, Pinellas Suncoast Fire & Rescue District

Chief Grimes provided a comprehensive presentation on hurricane preparedness based on his extensive disaster response experience. His background includes growing up on Longboat Key barrier island, serving as a firefighter there, and later operating the largest helicopter company globally, where he coordinated FEMA mass evacuations post-Katrina.

The presentation covered understanding major hurricane impacts, how disasters affect response capabilities, district emergency plans, and the critical importance of early evacuation. Chief Grimes showed extensive photographic evidence from major hurricanes.

Key Observations:

- Debris lines match seaweed lines on beaches, indicating eyewall impact zones
- Storm surge creates 24-foot water columns that wash away structures
- Flooding isolates communities when bridges and roads fail
- Infrastructure failures cascade (power, communications, fuel, food)

Modern Improvements: Chief Grimes emphasized that FEMA now pre-stages resources (1,000 ambulances were available for Pinellas during recent storms), federal search and rescue teams are mobilized, and a hospital ship is available from Pensacola.

Critical Incident Example: Chief Grimes described a near-crisis at Bayfront Hospital during a recent storm when the City of St. Petersburg turned off water. The hospital chiller required 100,000 gallons per day, and the fire district set up portable tanks and pumped water continuously to avoid evacuation.

District Emergency Plan:

- Emergency Operations Center (EOC) established at Indian Rocks Christian Church (Category 5 facility with \$500,000 generator grant)
- Will maintain operations as long as safe
- County transfers district operations to fire district during storms
- Post-storm house-by-house inspections planned using software to assess structural soundness and resident needs
- Multiple communication redundancies including Starlink satellite internet

Practical Advice for Residents:

- Know your evacuation zone
- Evacuate early
- Turn off all utilities (water, power, gas)
- Take medications and pets
- Do not wait for bridge closures
- Do not assume rescue availability during the storm

Electric Vehicle (EV) Battery Safety: If EVs are submerged, salt intrusion causes fires (50 EV fires were reported after recent storms). Recommendations include:

- Evacuate EV if possible
- If not, remove batteries to upper floor
- Disconnect battery
- Do not charge post-storm
- Move 50 feet from house before attempting restart

Chief Grimes emphasized the concept of "compression" - as evacuation timing compresses, roads become congested, making early departure critical.

The presentation included approximately 50 slides with rapid progression through photographic evidence.

3. Recap of Wed, May 13, 2026, Meeting

Presented by: Commissioner King

Commissioner King provided a recap of the previous meeting held on May 13, 2026. All task force members except Mark Arnold (who was traveling) were present at that meeting. The previous meeting included introductions, discussion of priorities for the task force, and a

presentation by Administrative Director Robin Gomez on FEMA and related topics, including a quiz.

The homework assignment from that meeting was for members to compile personal observations on what went well, what needed improvement, and lessons learned regarding pre-storm, during-storm, and post-storm experiences.

4. 2024 Hurricanes/Storms – HTF Members

- **Positives**
- **Lessons Learned**
- **Needs Improvement**

Presented by: Commissioner King

Commissioner King presented a comprehensive compilation of task force member input regarding the 2024 hurricane experiences.

Pre-Storm Communications - Positives

- Advance notification of storms and emergency conditions from state/county/city sources
- Multiple communication methods (text alerts, websites)
- Quarterly hurricane preparedness newsletters from Indian Rocks Beach with important phone numbers
- Sheriff patrol with PA announcements urging evacuation (occurred when mandatory evacuation was declared, with sirens and repeated messages)

Pre-Storm Communications - Needs Improvement

- Need for focused education on how rapid and devastating storm surge can occur
- Recommendation to use resources and visuals from Hurricane Ian and Helene to educate property owners
- Discussion of using these materials at a proposed Hurricane Expo
- Many neighbors are unaware of official city Facebook page, thinking the "I Love IRB" page is the official source
- Request for help promoting the official page, noting it was the only communication method available when the city lost its server during Helene
- Suggestion for requiring placards in short-term rentals as part of permit process with website addresses for emergency information
- Discussion of using multiple social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram) to reach different audiences

Pre-Storm Boat Preparation

Pre-Storm Infrastructure - Positives

- Completed or in-progress capital improvement projects for drainage
- Gutters were in good shape pre-storm

Pre-Storm Infrastructure - Needs Improvement

- Earlier maintenance and debris cleaning before rainy season
- Educating property owners on proper yard waste placement (not in streets or gutters where it can wash into storm drains)
- Faster restoration of public communication capabilities
- Exploring expansion of solar power capabilities to keep equipment running
- Indian Rocks Beach's sand dunes (the primary defense against Gulf storm surge) have eroded significantly - used to require walking over bridges to cross them, now it is a straight shot, making the area more vulnerable even to lesser storms

Pre-Storm Recovery Preparedness

- Need for pre-storm definition of what property owners can/should do post-storm regarding mold remediation, demolition, and trash separation
- Confusion about debris separation requirements - the trash removal company hired did not maintain proper separation despite requirements
- Recommendation to work with county/state/federal agencies to seek funding for property hardening against floods
- Pinellas County has \$813 million available, currently being distributed primarily for rebuilding/elevating homes for lower-income residents
- Discussion of preparing property owners with Indian Rocks Beach-specific information rather than just county-level information
- Recommendation to host a Hurricane Expo for Indian Rocks Beach

Pre-Storm Building Preparation - Positives

- Indian Rocks Beach consistently making sandbags available locally

Pre-Storm Building Preparation - Needs Improvement

Ms. McMullen conducted research on sandbag effectiveness and proper usage, distributing printed materials. She noted that sandbags give false hope and people do not know proper placement or whether to use plastic barriers.

- Recommendation for better education on boat tie-down methods, lift height requirements, and boat removal resources
- Discussion that for the experienced storm surge, lifts could not be raised high enough to prevent boats from floating

- Sandbag availability should be provided well in advance, not last-minute, to avoid sending message that "if you get sandbags you don't have to evacuate"
- Suggestion to demonstrate proper sandbag setup at the Expo
- Long-term resilience and flood hardening for commercial and residential buildings, with evaluation of grant funding opportunities

Additional Pre-Storm Discussion

Ms. Landry raised concern about tourists and renters in properties who may not receive proper communication from owners. She noted families stuck on her street during Hurricane Helene who lost vehicles and could not evacuate or return home. She noted that City information is sent to property owners on record but may not reach actual occupants. She suggested "zone team leaders" or "neighborhood champions" to communicate with people in their neighborhoods and with the city, both pre- and post-storm, to track who is staying in rentals/Airbnb.

Ms. McMullen raised concern about "hurricane party" culture at local businesses where people were not taking the storm seriously and dismissed safety suggestions online. She proposed:

- Encouraging bars/restaurants to share official evacuation information via social media and in-person
- Displaying evacuation notices, QR codes, and photos of previous storm damage
- Discussing limitations on late-night operations, alcohol sales, or hurricane party promotions during mandatory evacuations
- Creating a video montage of local storm damage to play on repeat, showing recognizable local businesses underwater

Ms. Cisarik proposed using the city's main phone number to include a hurricane hotline option, providing one-minute messages with preparation information, shelter locations, and additional phone numbers pre-storm. Post-storm, it could provide answers to the "five big questions":

- Which areas are without power
- Water depth
- Bridge reopening status
- Sand on Gulf Boulevard status
- Cellular/internet provider status (Spectrum, Frontier)

This would help people planning to return, including potentially getting burner phones from working carriers. The hotline could direct people to the official Facebook page.

Beach Renourishment Update: Army Corps of Engineers agreed to no longer require perpetual easements from beachfront owners, only temporary ones, to facilitate faster beach renourishment.

Post-Storm Access to Island - Positives

- Sheriff presence to control access was good

- Deputies were numerous and informative when residents could speak with them

Post-Storm Access to Island - Needs Improvement

- Slow access for property owners, poorly communicated
- Balance needed between safety/navigability and property owners' need to quickly mitigate damage (mold develops rapidly)
- Request for different communication approach with County Sheriff regarding access timing
- Recommendation to tighten the access window to allow earlier entry
- Discussion of officially allowing boat access
- Recommendation to allow boat access but restrict vehicle access until streets are clear
- Sheriff Gualtieri commented at the Big-C meeting that he understands property owners' access concerns but that debris-covered streets prevented safe vehicle entry. He also noted new grant-funded equipment, including drones for rapid assessment, with a public demonstration scheduled June 18 at 10 a.m. at the fleet center on 29th Street.

Post-Storm Bridge Access - Major Concern

Members agreed that the decision to open bridges to general public was too soon. Residents barely back and still assessing damage when bridges opened to everyone. Issues included:

- Looters and "looky-loos" driving around
- Personal safety concerns (many staying in campers felt very unsafe)
- No increased patrol to compensate for removal of deputies from bridges
- Strong recommendation to keep bridges closed to residents only for longer period
- Items that looked like garbage were actually residents' salvageable belongings
- Hang tags were issued for vehicle identification but rarely checked

Post-Storm Unauthorized Access

- Early bridge opening resulted in unauthorized/unlicensed contractors accessing island
- Anecdotes of property owners giving emergency access passes to "random people" who should not have been on island
- Scrap dealers, pickers, and looters took items needed for insurance documentation
- Safety concerns due to confrontations with insufficient police presence to assist

Post-Storm Communications - Failures

- Many commitments to daily/weekly communications were never kept
- Misinformation and incomplete/conflicting information across multiple platforms (city meetings, various Facebook pages)
- In absence of official information, well-meaning citizens, realtors, and insurance agents held unauthorized and inaccurate information sessions
- Lack of coordination with county, FDOT, FEMA, and other agencies to ensure real-time official information

- No definitive source of truth for Indian Rocks Beach
- City officials unable to cite regulations, laws, or policies as source of their information

Post-Storm Communications - Needs Improvement

- Emergency communication plan appears incomplete and needs revision
- Need more robust plan with key agency points of contact for real-time information
- Difficulty getting IRB-specific information (could get county information but not city-specific details) for evacuated residents and out-of-state owners - had to rely on friends who stayed for street-level updates
- Suggestion for an IRB hotline with recorded message on power availability, water depth, bridge accessibility, road status, etc.
- Need for neighborhood/zone captains to coordinate with city and provide information to evacuated property owners
- Importance of pre-storm education on FEMA debris separation requirements

Post-Storm Debris/Trash Collection

Positives:

- Generally good in most neighborhoods
- Handled relatively quickly compared to other communities

Needs Improvement:

- Contractor was very sloppy and unprofessional
- Mixed debris that residents had separated
- Disparity in services for private streets
- Lithium-ion batteries and E-vehicles post-flood disposition unclear
- Delayed street cleaning with glass/nails causing tire punctures and safety concerns
- Advance communications needed on FEMA debris separation requirements

Post-Storm Community Support and Recovery

Positives:

- Resident-led donation centers and volunteer efforts

Needs Improvement:

- No pre-established donation/recovery sites
- Comfort stations valuable but deployment could be faster with multiple locations North/South
- Need for partnerships with national/local organizations/restaurants/churches for supplies and meals
- Pre-planning donation/recovery sites and comfort stations

- Expanding organizational partnerships

Post-Storm Building Recovery

Issues Identified:

- FEMA/NFIP/floodplain management roles not fully understood or communicated by city
- Inaccurate and conflicting demolition/reconstruction information
- Permitting procedures and substantial damage determination unclear and inconsistent
- Inconsistent enforcement of building permit requirements with many businesses and short-term rentals rebuilding without permits before Christmas
- Some state-licensed contractors from other parts of Florida operating without proper Pinellas County registration
- Workers' compensation insurance requirements for self-permitting homeowners unclear
- Unlicensed contractors operating in IRB and other Barrier Island Communities

Scott Holmes provided detailed technical explanation of:

- FEMA 50% rule and substantial damage process
- Actual cash value appraisals
- Electrical replacement recommendations
- Concerns about elevated homes creating false sense of security without structural/window/roof upgrades
- Homeowners can do their own cost estimates for 50% rule compliance
- Elevated homes without structural upgrades create false security but still require continued evacuation

Additional Concerns:

- Contractor fraud and unpermitted work
- Food truck policy restrictions during recovery
- FEMA audits

Recommendations:

- Educating city staff on floodplain manager role
- Developing post-storm building recovery handbook
- Establishing remote early-start permitting and pop-up help stations
- Publishing a plan consistent with floodplain manager responsibilities
- Allowing food trucks/mobile businesses during recovery as policy exception
- Clearer delineation of city vs. county responsibilities, particularly regarding floodplain management and permitting enforcement

Post-Storm City Operations Recovery

- Questions about robustness of risk management plan and continuity of operations for City Hall and critical facilities during prolonged outages
- Recommendation to review risk management/continuity plans

Homework Assignment and Prioritization

Commissioner King proposed that members prioritize the aggregated list of issues and recommendations before the next meeting (June 10), focusing on the top five actionable items that would be meaningful for the city and community. This prioritization will form the basis of the task force's action plan. Members were assigned homework to review all inputs and identify their top five priorities.

Positive Feedback: Participants shared positive experiences with county inspectors once the 50% rule determination was made.

5. City and Community/Neighbor Roles

- **Hurricane Planning & Preparation**
- **Expectations - Before, During, After Storm**

Presented by: City Manager Ryan Henderson

Commissioner King confirmed this item was from the previous agenda and the group agreed to skip it for this meeting, as the discussion had been integrated throughout the review of Agenda Item 4.

Key Points Discussed (integrated throughout Agenda Item 4):

- Need for neighborhood/zone captains to coordinate with city and provide information to evacuated property owners
- Importance of pre-storm education on FEMA debris separation requirements
- Community self-help through volunteer networks and donation centers
- Resident responsibility for understanding permitting requirements and contractor verification
- Business owner needs temporary operating solutions (food trucks) during recovery
- Homeowner education on 50% rule, actual cash value appraisals, electrical safety, and proper contractor engagement including notice of commencement, mechanics liens, and avoiding advance payments
- Respective roles of city, residents, businesses, and contractors in hurricane preparation and recovery, with emphasis on education and advance planning

6. Next Steps

Presented by: City Manager Ryan Henderson

City of IRB Hurricane Expo

City Manager Ryan Henderson confirmed that staff can begin planning the Hurricane Expo around the sandbag day when sand becomes available. He suggested opening the chambers for the event and noted that with reasonable notice, getting participants from the county and other agencies should not be difficult.

The task force discussed building the Expo around the sandbag day, likely toward the end of June. Potential participants discussed included:

- Fire Chief Grimes
- Red Cross (who provided early supplies during Helene recovery)
- Sheriff's Office
- Indian Rocks Beach Police Department
- Representative Kim Berfield
- Meteorologist Brian McClure

The group discussed the importance of communications and maintaining preparedness awareness to avoid complacency. Concerns raised about complacency after years of evacuations without incidents, noting even flood-proofed businesses failed to deploy protections before recent storms.

Tax-Exempt Hurricane Supplies

Administrative Assistant Mishelle Hargett provided information regarding tax-exempt hurricane supplies, noting that many items, including generators, have been permanently exempt from sales tax since August 2025.

Public Comment

Diane Daniel, 309 10th Avenue: Praised the task force's work and wished they had been active two years ago. She emphasized the importance of communication and suggested the city needs dedicated communications resources beyond Administrative Assistant Hargett's side work. She recommended reaching out to Airbnb hosts and property managers as communication channels, noting that about 10 leading property managers serve the area. She offered to connect the city with the local Airbnb community coordinator. Ms. Daniel expressed hope for free personal flotation devices at the Hurricane Expo and encouraged broader community participation in the task force's findings.

7. Q&A / Open Discussion

Summary: This section was incorporated into the discussion of Agenda Item 2, Agenda Item 6 and additional task force member comments about complacency and maintaining preparedness awareness.

Ms. Cisarik asked about future fire station planning for the district, specifically whether Indian Shores Tiki Gardens property could include a non-evacuation station similar to Madeira Beach's elevated station. Chief Grimes responded that Tiki Gardens will be a Category 5 station with safe living quarters, but the apparatus floor cannot be elevated to evacuation level due to space

constraints for ramps. The philosophy is to build Category 5 apparatus floors that are occupiable post-storm. Church of Isles property will have a Category 5 apparatus floor with generator rooms, showers, and decontamination area. Ms. Cisarik followed up asking if Church of Isles one-story existing home could have a second story added or be replaced with two-story living quarters. Chief Grimes responded that they are currently operating under the 50% rule for repairs while hoping to avoid future flooding events.

Ms. McMullen noted the donation center was an important gathering point for residents to get information during recent storms. She suggested micro-hubs around the city for official information. She asked if the new fire station could incorporate features to help residents' post-storm: solar charging for phones, cooling station, refrigerated medication storage. She asked if grants are available for such features. Chief Grimes responded that the new station will absolutely serve as a resource for water, food, personal supplies, and internet access. Staff are skilled at identifying Emergency Management grants and other funding sources, they already secured a \$500,000 generator grant for the church property.

Ed Klaskowski described fires on 12th Street during recent storms despite pulling power meters completely out. He discovered the cable company had wrapped lines around power lines, that remained hot and smoldered for approximately 2 days before catching fire, even when Duke power was off. He called 911 four times, received good communication about 45-minute response times. The fire department extinguished multiple such fires. He noted that appliances could still present an electrical shock hazard despite meter removal. He asked if coordination with cable companies is in any plans. He stated that fires occurred in 4 feet of water on 12th Street.

Chief Grimes responded that power could come back through other means including grounds even when cut off. Cable companies need to do a better job.

Commissioner King noted Spectrum is meeting with City Staff and acknowledged the cable line issue is likely a county-wide or state-wide problem.

Ed Klaskowski added not only cable, but all abandoned copper lines are problematic. Chief agreed, stating that cities should require companies doing business in the community to clean up old infrastructure as a condition of operating privilege.

City Manager Henderson offered to reach out to cable providers to understand their lessons learned and hurricane preparedness efforts and will provide information to the task force if received.

Administrative Director Gomez noted cities are looking at communicating with all communication companies to remove old lines, not just Spectrum. He mentioned Frontier is laying fiber on Harbor Drive which may alleviate some issues.

8. Adjournment

Commissioner King thanked all participants for their thoughtful comments and support.

Meeting adjourned.

Attestation

These minutes constitute a true and accurate record of the Hurricane Task Force Meeting held on Wednesday, May 27, 2026, at the City of Indian Rocks Beach.



Commissioner Hilary King

Date: 9 June 2026